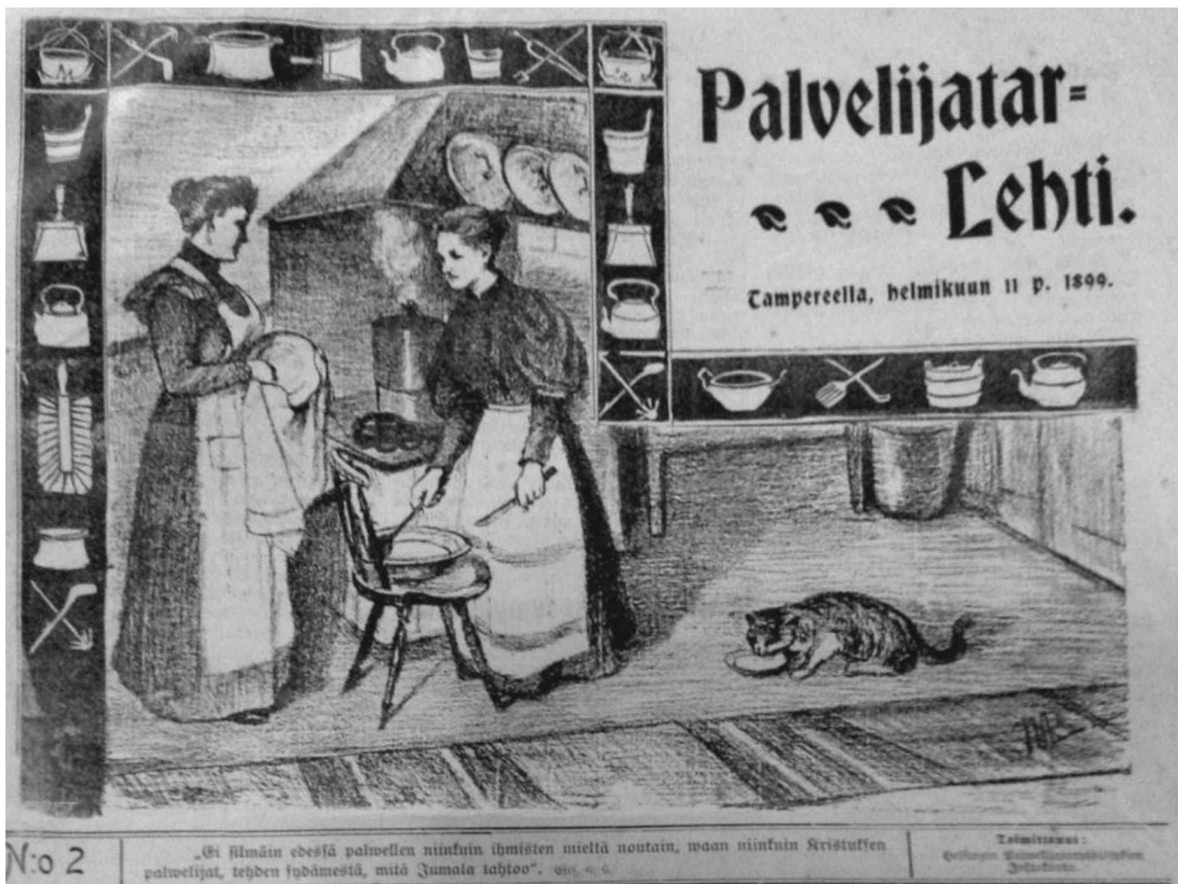
When Socialists Won Women’s Suffrage

Contrary to the myth that socialists have always ignored gender oppression, women’s suffrage was first won by socialist feminists — and working-class revolt.



Cover of Palvejitarlehti (Maids' Journal), a radical Finnish newspaper from the turn of the century.

There are a lot of different ways to discredit working-class politics. As the continued promotion of the “Bernie Bro” myth illustrates, one of the most popular today is to claim that socialists ignore women’s oppression. Elaborate versions of this argument fill the blogosphere, Twitter, and academia. By focusing only on economic issues and class, we are told, the socialist movement has always marginalized women and their specific demands for liberation.

Like all good liberal myths, these arguments rely on bad history. Working-class feminism has a long and rich history. For over a century working women fought for their own liberation through the socialist movement.

Few cases better illustrate this point (or have been more buried by history) than that of turn-of-the-century Finland. In 1906, through a mass general strike and

working-class insurgency against the Russian Empire, it became the first nation to grant universal suffrage. Socialists were at the forefront.

The Finnish Buildup

Of all the lands of the tsarist empire, Finland had throughout the nineteenth century been allowed the most self-government and political freedom. Annexing Finland from Sweden in 1809, the Tsar granted its new dominion extensive autonomy, though the Russian regime maintained ultimate authority. Finland preserved its own constitution and most state functions were governed by Finns through their autonomous Senate. In 1863, a new Finnish parliament was established, though only a small percentage of the population was allowed to participate in its election.

A crucial turning point in Finnish history came in 1899. In February, the Tsar began to eliminate Finland's special autonomous status, attempting to bring it under the same forms of administration as the rest of the empire. Soon a major Finnish national protest movement emerged against this "Russification."

1899 also marked the emergence of the Finnish labor movement as an independent political force. After a string of labor strikes, the Finnish Workers Party was founded in July 1899. Whereas socialist parties across the Russian empire were banned and forced underground, the relative political freedom prevailing in Finland allowed the Workers Party to exist as a legal organization.

Though virtually all labor leaders in Finland supported the reestablishment of Finnish autonomy, the question of whether to collaborate, and on what basis, with the Finnish liberal "constitutionalists" against Russification became a major debate. While the constitutionalists essentially fought for a return to the pre-1899 status quo, the labor movement tied the national struggle to popular demands, such as improved conditions for urban and rural workers, the prohibition of alcohol, and the expansion of the vote.

One of the central points of contention between workers and constitutionalists was the issue of suffrage, from which all working people — both men and women — were excluded at that time. Constitutionalists refused to support universal suffrage. The conservative Association of Finnish Women led by women's rights activist Alexandra Gripenberg, for example, argued that lower-class women were ignorant and prone to vice, therefore they had to be guided by their morally superior upper-class sisters.

In contrast, the Workers Party from its inception demanded suffrage for all: the right to vote and to run for office irrespective of wealth, gender, or nationality. In 1900, it helped found the socialist-led League of Working Women to involve working-class women in the labor movement, to develop their leadership

capacity, and to help raise their demands.
Socialist leader Hilja Pärssinen, the working-women movement's main theoretician, advocated a strict class-against-class perspective along the lines set out by the German Marxists August Bebel and Clara Zetkin. Pärssinen's 1903 pamphlet on women and the vote made the case for irreconcilable class conflict: bourgeois women wanted only equality with upper-class men, while women workers wanted the vote to pass laws to improve their material conditions.
That same year, the Workers Party adopted a Marxist program, renamed itself the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and announced that if its suffrage demands were not met, it would resort to a general strike to win them.

The Great Strike of 1905

The Bloody Sunday massacre of unarmed protestors in St Petersburg on January 9, 1905 sparked revolt across the entire empire. This upheaval, more often than not under socialist leadership or influence, demanded better working conditions, political freedom, and a democratic republic — and it came close to toppling the increasingly discredited tsarist regime.
The revolution arrived relatively late in Finland. Inspired by the general strike in central Russia, Finnish railway workers walked off the job on October 29, 1905, setting into motion the "Great Strike." By October 30, all of Finland was on strike, and effective power passed into the hands of strike committees and armed guards. The event radically transformed the consciousness of urban and rural working people. And perhaps nowhere was this transformation more pronounced than among women workers.
Palvelijatarlehti (The Maids' Paper) noted:
The strike week was a wake-up week for the rights of women. … As soon as the strike began, women started to hold special meetings in which they debated their economic position, and these meetings were flooded by people. It was as if it took the breakout of the general strike to make women realize that it would depend on themselves whether the status of women improved or not.
Miina Sillanpää, the influential socialist leader of the maids' association, noted that the week of the general strike accomplished among the maids "more than what could have been promoted in ten years of peaceful conditions." Bourgeois society was particularly scandalized by the participation of their servants in the action, which shattered paternalistic notions of maids as members of the host family and represented the direct intrusion of the labor movement into their homes. In daily mass meetings in a Helsinki elementary school courtyard, thousands of servants came together to formulate their demands.
The call for full suffrage was legitimized by this mass female participation in all

arenas of the strike, including in its top leadership; the Tampere Strike Committee, initially composed only of men, was quickly reorganized to include ten women and twelve men.

“We live in a wonderful period of time,” wrote Alma Malander in the SDP newspaper *Kansan Lehti* (The People’s Paper) in December 1905:

Peoples who were humble and satisfied to bear the burden of slavery have suddenly thrown off their yoke. Groups who until now have been eating pine bark, now demand bread. The oppressed demand justice! … Women, who have always been subordinate, suddenly get the idea that they really are equal with the other sex.

Faced with the imminent overthrow of the regime by a paralyzing labor strike, peasant rebellions, and army mutinies, the Tsar was forced on October 30 to promise civil liberties and a parliament for the whole empire. On November 4, the Tsar’s “November Manifesto” repealed the Russification of Finland, reestablishing the pre-1899 status quo — without guaranteeing that the new Finnish Parliament would be elected by the whole population.

Though constitutionalists and socialists had closely collaborated during the first days of the November Great Strike, this tenuous alliance quickly broke down into open conflict. After the Tsar’s “November Manifesto,” the constitutionalists pushed for an end to the strike, as their main demand — the restoration of pre-1899 “constitutional legality” — had been achieved. In contrast, the workers’ movement continued to demand universal suffrage and a unicameral parliament.

Having felt their power to shut down society, Finnish workers were determined to continue mobilizing. Immediately following the strike, the SDP began organizing mass demonstrations and building for a new general strike to ensure their political demands. The next half-year witnessed an unprecedented number of strikes, the rapid spread of socialist influence among tenant farmers and workers in the countryside, the creation of a workers’ Red Guard, and closer Finnish socialist collaboration with Russian Marxists. It was during this upsurge that the campaign for women’s suffrage reached its highest peak.

The Suffrage Struggle

Following the Great Strike, there was considerable and justifiable concern that women would be excluded in the upcoming elections. During the April 1905 suffrage reform bill discussions in the Finnish parliament, only the Peasants Estate had supported women’s suffrage, while other estates and the various constitutionalist parties all favored giving the vote only to men. The chair of the Parliamentary Reform Committee chosen in November 1905 to draft the new

suffrage rules was liberal leader Robert Hermanson, an outspoken opponent of women's suffrage. Women, he felt, were by nature emotional creatures prone to extremism and ill-suited for politics.

In this context, League of Working Women leaders argued that working-class women had to take the initiative to ensure that their demands were met:

We [working women] have to shout to the world that we are demanding the right to vote and to stand for election, and that we are not going to settle for anything less. Now is not the time for compromises, because if we are excluded now, we can be sure that it will remain that way for a long time.

By the end of 1905, the League, with the support of the whole Finnish Social Democracy, had organized 231 suffrage meetings across the nation with 41,333 participants. It called for a new general strike in the case that women were excluded from the vote, and it established a special women's committee to start preparations.

It was announced that any male party members who opposed women's suffrage would be denounced as collaborators of the bourgeoisie. Some female workers threatened to go on a cooking strike at home to force skeptical husbands to support their struggle. And there were even public statements made that if women were left out of the vote, women workers would, if necessary, strike on their own, even against the opposition of the other party members.

The influx of women into political life challenged traditional gender roles. Miina Sillanpää called on men to stay at home and watch the children to enable their wives' participation in political meetings.

Perhaps the most powerful actions of the suffrage campaign were its mass demonstrations. On December 17, 1905, the League organized protests for women's suffrage in sixty-three towns across the nation, bringing together over 22,000 demonstrators. A "National Women's Declaration" written by the League's leadership was sent out to be adopted by each rally.

The fate [of Finland] concerns us just as much as men. Is it any wonder that tens of thousands of us rise up to call for our rights, to demand for ourselves equality with men. A powerful cry is echoing across our country at this moment, from the large cities to the villages, showing that the majority of citizens support the heartfelt wishes of women. The demand of women for the vote and to run in elections will be silenced only when it is granted. The right to vote is a means for us to shut off the flow of alcohol, to raise the proletariat from material and psychological distress, to prepare the way for light and freedom.

The rallies continued into 1906 and the Finnish Social Democratic Party did not waver on demanding suffrage for all. But a new general strike did not ultimately prove necessary to win this demand, as the Parliamentary Reform Committee

eventually announced that all women would be allowed to vote and run for office, despite considerable controversy within the Committee over the latter point in particular.

How can we explain this decision by a Finnish political elite that until then had consistently opposed universal suffrage? Put simply, they were forced into it. The pressure of the workers' upsurge during and following the Great Strike of 1905, and the real threat of a new general strike, proved greater than elite opposition to universal suffrage.

That the suffrage decision had been imposed from below was openly admitted at the time. The influential banker and politician Emil Schybergson told the Parliamentary Reform Committee that the revolution had forced them to rush through a decision that might otherwise have waited another fifty years. Indeed, it took many more decades for other countries to grant full suffrage, including France (1944), Italy (1946), and Switzerland (1971).

The Tsar's acceptance of the Finnish suffrage proposal on July 20, 1906 was similarly a victory imposed by revolutionary struggle. Such an act would have been inconceivable without ongoing mass rebellion across Russia, which flared up again that summer in a new wave of peasant revolts and army mutinies. Through this concession, the embattled tsarist regime hoped to quell unrest in Finland in order to concentrate its forces on putting down the revolution in the rest of the empire.

The suffrage campaign lasted all the way through 1907. In January, the League sent out a memorandum to its local branches, calling on them to ensure that the SDP electoral slates include a sufficient number of women candidates. By this time, over 18,000 women had joined the party, close to a quarter of the total membership.

The 1907 elections were swept by the Finnish Social Democracy. It won 37 percent of the vote — the highest of any party — and of the nineteen women in the new Parliament, nine were socialists. The latter were a remarkable group, all leaders of the League and most from humble backgrounds. Anni Huotari, Maria Laine, Maria Raunio, and Sandra Reinholdsson were seamstresses; Jenny Kilpianen was a weaver; Mimmi Kanervo was a maid, as had been Miina Sillanpää; Ida Ahlstedt was a baker and boarding-house operator; and Hilja Pärssinen was a school teacher.

Prominent feminists were, at best, ambivalent about the suffrage victory. The Finnish Women's Association's top leaders still stressed that Finnish working-class women were too backwards and unprepared for full suffrage. Alexandra Gripenberg declared to a 1907 women's congress in Vienna that the entry of uneducated, plebeian women into Parliament was a "horrible" embarrassment.

Most of the socialist MPs, Gripenberg lamented, were "formerly servants, factory hands, or seamstresses. … It was a mistake that so few really able and suitable women for the work in the Diet [Parliament] were elected. … If we had women lawyers, merchants, physicians, scientists, and so on, women's words would have weighed more."

Hilja Pärssinen, in contrast, traveled abroad to present the Finnish struggle as an unqualified victory and a vindication of a strict class-versus-class political perspective. She argued in the British newspaper *Justice* that "women who have to fight together with their men comrades for the abolition of the present capitalist system and the private ownership of the means of production cannot work together with women who support this very system." In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, she declared:

I should very much like through your paper to send a message to the American people, and to ask them why they have not yet granted the suffrage to women, and to urge upon them, out of a considerable practical experience of its value, the importance of making this great, and ultimately necessary, political change.

Pärssinen's perspective was shared by the workers' movement in Russia and beyond. For August Bebel, the German SPD leader and author of the influential work *Women and Socialism*, the events in Finland represented "the triumph of international socialism." Similarly, Alexandra Kollontai at the 1908 First All-Russian Women's Congress pointed to Finland to show that "in those countries where unlimited political rights for women have been achieved, this has been done only with the help of the social-democrats."