

# Some women who led workers' struggles

*Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at the Independent Working-Class Education Network (IWCEN) meeting on 'Women Making History', held at the Working-Class Movement Library in Salford on 7th September 2019.*

I will be talking about some of the leading roles played by women in working-class self-organisation and socialist struggles between 1830-1930. That is, roughly, from the year of the first big strike and insurrection by industrial workers (the Lyons silkweavers in 1831) to Hitler coming to power in 1933, or from the revolution that overthrew the French monarchy in 1830 to the 1929 stock market crash. As an example, let us consider, then, who were Esther Anderson, Jane Fletcher, Bridget Gatley, Jane Hannah, Sarah Massie, Ann Scott and Diana Yates?

These women were weavers charged with riotous assembly in Stretford Road, Manchester on the afternoon of Tuesday the 13th September 1842. The context was the 'Plug Plot Riots' - that is, the embryonic general strike at that time stretching from Scotland to the West Country. What they did was part of an attempt by women to stop mills being re-opened in the Oxford Road area of Manchester, mostly by throwing stones at the windows of these mills, then at the police, and then at the soldiers sent to stop them.

In terms of a pattern of grassroots activity, we can maybe divide the 1830-1930 period into long phases when people at the bottom of the social order appear to have been quiescent and short ones when we see that this was an illusion. In the UK such points of uprising were the mid 1830s to the early 1840s, the 1880s, 1906 to 1913, and in 1919.

Within this overall pattern, there were definite points when action by women triggered big movements involving men as well. For example the 1888 Matchworkers' strike set off the New Unionism movement, and the 1910 action by

chainmakers in Cradley Heath preceded the 'Great Unrest'. Or another example is the Singer Sewing Machine strike that took place in Glasgow in 1911. Here, in an action that foreshadowed 'Red Clydeside', 10,000 of the 11,500 workers employed in the Singers factory, 3,000 of whom were women, went on strike within one day of 15 of these women being victimised. Elsewhere we can think of the 1912 strike of textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts (the famous 'Bread and Roses' strike) that signalled the rise of the Industrial Workers of the World as a force in the East of the US, or the demonstration by women workers in February 1917 that triggered the Russian Revolution.

With this background in mind, let us now look at some of the women who were in positions of formal 'leadership'. This history arguably falls into another set of phases of its own.

In the first such phase, the ideas of French Enlightenment thinkers exercised an influence over workers' self-organisation. We see this especially in movements associated with the 'critical utopian socialists': Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. One aspect of these movements was a strong emphasis on cooperatives.

Several socialist feminists were prominent in these 'utopian' movements - among them, in the UK, Fanny Wright, Frances Morrison, Emma Martin, Catherine Barmby and Margaret Chappellsmith. We can look at two such activists in particular.

Anna Wheeler (1785- 1848) was an Irish landowner who became prominent as a socialist

in the UK and in France. One side of her activity was the influential books she co-authored with William Thompson, as a result of which she was arguably one of the two key theorists behind the whole Owenite movement.

Flora Tristan (1803-1844), who was partly Peruvian and partly French, wrote in 1840 a groundbreaking study of working-class life in London (*Promenade dans Londres*). In her most famous work *Union Ouvriere (The Workers' Union)*, published in 1843, she proposed an international cooperative of all workers (which in the context meant mainly artisans), the aim being that through this workers themselves would organise for their social welfare and collective economic advancement, independently of other classes.

If we turn now to the second phase of formal leadership, we see that, after the defeat of the revolutions that took place across Europe in 1848-49, there was a long period of quiescence. Many revolutionaries from elsewhere in Europe, including Karl Marx, were in exile here, and some of their ideas spread gradually through the male-dominated workers' clubs that developed across London and other cities. (The first English translation, by Helen Macfarlane, of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, originally written by Marx and Engels at the start of 1848, was published in 1850.) Over the same period, mainstream trades unions here were organising to win electoral influence

Meanwhile, in Germany in 1875 the United Social Democratic Workers' Party (SPD) was formed by a fusion of the movement founded by Ferdinand Lassalle with the Marxist one formed by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, and in 1879 the first of many editions of Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus (Woman and Socialism)*, arguably the most influential socialist book ever written, was published.

Activity in the UK began to revive from early 1880s, and we can look at two examples of women who played central roles at the head of this.

Annie Besant (1847-1933) was a journalist from a well-off background. She was involved in the Fabian Society and briefly in the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) - ie she was at least nominally a Marxist - and involved also in organising what became known as the Bloody Sunday rally, in Trafalgar Square on 13th

November 1887. In 1888 the central activists amongst the Bryant and May matchworkers - Alice Martin, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling and Eliza Martin - invited her to support them, and she went on to publicise their struggle effectively.

Eleanor Marx (1855-98) led the Bloomsbury Socialist Society breakaway from the SDF and Socialist League, becoming a national and international Marxist socialist organiser, speaker, writer and translator.

A third phase in which women exercised formal leadership began, arguably, when in Germany in 1890 the SPD was legalised after twelve years of partial illegality, and as a result grew rapidly, to become biggest socialist party in world, which in turn led, from 1909 onwards, following a change in the law, to a rapid expansion of women's involvement. Meanwhile, during the 1880s, increasingly strong opposition movements grew in Russia, one focused mainly on peasants, and one on industrial workers. There was an important involvement of young women from well-off backgrounds in both of these movements, especially as teachers conducting study circles

At the same time, mass migration took place of poor people from Eastern and Southern Europe to the USA. A high proportion of these migrants became industrial workers, including amongst them large numbers of women in textile factories. There was, then, by 1900 a rise of combative workers' and socialist movements in most European countries and in the US. Over the same period (for example in the UK from the 1870 Education Act onwards) elementary education was significantly extended.

One consequence of these changes was a growth of oppositional working-class adult education movements. Another was an increase of working-class women in organising roles. And a third was an absolute increase in the numbers of women in formal leadership roles.

Examples of such women in the UK include: Mary Macarthur, Mary Bridges Adams, Ethel Carnie, Ada Nield Chew, Dora Montefiore, Daisy Warwick, Sylvia Pankhurst, Ellen Wilkinson, Winifred Horrabin, Janet Rae, Nellie Cressall, Minnie Lansbury, Susan Lawrence, Jennie Mackay, and Julia Scurr, and in the US: Florence Kelley, Mary Harris, Lucy Parsons, Ella Reeve Bloor, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mary Marcy, Kate Richards O'Hare, Rose Schneiderman and Fannia Cohn.

In Russia, on the other hand, most people will probably know of Nadezdha Krupskaya, Alexandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand. But in their 1999 book *Midwives of the Revolution*, Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar list a further 31 women who were prominent Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP) and/or Bolshevik party activists. Again: most people know that Lenin's elder brother, Alexander, was executed for oppositional activity against the tsar. But how many people know that both the oldest Ulianov sibling, Anna Ulianova-Elizarova, and one of the younger sisters, Mariia Ul'ianova, independently of Lenin, were high profile RSDRP and Bolshevik activists?

Having looked at examples of economic and political struggle, we can look at one from the ideological sphere.

Discussing 'civilisation', Rosa Luxemburg once described it as:

'. . . that brief recent epoch of cultural history in which private property arose on the ruins of communism and with it a public organisation of compulsion: the state and the exclusive dominance of man over woman in the state, in property right and in the family. In this relatively brief historical period fall the greatest and most rapid advances in production, science and art, but also the deepest fissure of society by class antagonism, the greatest misery for the mass of the people and their greatest enslavement.'

In other words, she was saying that, for most of human history, people had organised themselves in democratic communities, where women and men were equal, and descent was normally in the female line. What lies behind this?

Luxemburg had a PhD in Economics. In 1907 she reluctantly agreed to teach in the SPD school for party activists, which was based in Berlin. (Clara Zetkin had played a central role in the setting up of this school the year before.) Luxemburg taught there till 1914, teaching two-hour sessions, on four days a week, for six months each year. She used a participatory approach. There were some women in each student group. Her lectures focused on explaining Marx's ideas

Between late 1907 and 1911 Luxemburg also drafted a textbook based on these sessions, which was first published in 1925 in Germany. In English its title is: *Introduction to Political*

*Economy*. The passage I quoted comes from that book. There is a background to this as follows.

In 1880-81 Karl Marx (who died in 1883) made a lot of notes from studies by people who through fieldwork had investigated social formations in Germany, Russia, India, the USA and Australia. This fieldwork revealed survivals of egalitarian social orders that must have existed across most of the world before class society became dominant.

Bebel had referred to these studies in *Woman and Socialism*, and Engels, drawing partly on Marx's notes, did the same in his book *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (published in German in 1884, and in English 1891). They used the term 'primitive communism' to refer to these social orders that existed before class society developed. ('Primitive' here means original, not backward.)

At the same time, big moves were made by mainstream academics to rubbish this whole idea. However, in her Party School teaching and the book she based on that teaching, Luxemburg reasserted it.

Experience suggests that an approach based on these ideas is one of the best ways of explaining socialist economic and political ideas to working-class adults. If so, Luxemburg's approach was an example of independent working-class education at its strongest. It drew out a feminist dimension that had begun to develop in Marxism in the 1880s, and at the same time it's highly relevant to capitalist globalisation now. Above all, it provides an objective basis for hope that 'this isn't all there is'. Therefore it's arguably a model for people like ourselves to revive and build on now.