

# Theoretical Seminar of the World Women's Movement: Introductory Presentation on the Liberation of Women (3rd Day)

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Monika Gärtner-Engel and Halinka Augustin, November 2018

Dear friends and comrades,

I will read out a joint presentation written by Monika Gärtner-Engel, the former European coordinator and a provider of ideas for the World Women's Conference and this seminar – and by myself. Monika is also the co-author of the book, *New Perspectives for the Liberation of Women*, which has been translated into seven languages to date and is studied and discussed in many countries worldwide. Unfortunately, she cannot participate herself but sends us warm greetings and best wishes for success. Although she cannot be present we asked her to contribute to this speech on the topic, which is based on the above-mentioned book! I will now read out the contribution.

Dear friends and comrades,

During recent years, the international militant women's movement has obviously strengthened itself, accomplished great achievements through struggle, and has made significant progress.

Let us just look at the last few months:

- Thousands of female workers of You Li International in Cambodia have been fighting since July. Shorter time allowances worsen the working conditions. The wages of the workers who do not fulfill the targets are cut; this also applies to pregnant women.
- In Swaziland on 18 September, 10,000 female and male workers from five textile plants went on strike for higher wages and better working conditions – despite being violently attacked by the police.
- Since the end of September, in Indonesia thousands of female workers of the garment factory PT II Jin Sun have been on strike, because their wages have not been paid for months.
- For two months, female textile workers in Myanmar went on strike for better working conditions. Their demands were largely fulfilled. The management sent in gangs of thugs. Since that time, the women have been organizing a protest camp in front of the gates.
- At the end of October 3,000 female workers of the garment factory Ivory Vietnam went on strike against too many extra shifts, low extra pay, and too expensive canteen meals.

Conclusion: more and more women are becoming part of the **international industrial proletariat and the working class**. They constitute the backbone of the militant women's movement. The numerous **female textile workers** are in the vanguard worldwide.

Female workers are fighting in many other areas for higher wages and the recognition of their work. The **trade-union women's movement is getting stronger**:

- In November, 4,500 Marriott hotel employees, the majority of them women, went on strike in the USA for the demands: "One job should be enough," but also for workplace safety, in particular for better protection

against sexual harassment.

- For one day, female tea workers in Sri Lanka brought to a standstill not only all tea plantations in the largest tea-growing area, but also the entire city traffic there. They fight for wages high enough to meet the basic needs of their families.
- On 31 October, thousands of female noon-meal helpers in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu went on an unlimited strike – starting with a street blockade. They demand higher wages, maternity protection, and pension insurance.
- Carers, midwives and nurses are fighting in the Netherlands, in Spain; 12-week-strike at the university hospitals in Essen und Düsseldorf together with the trade union ver.di in Germany; demonstrations in 13 cities in New Zealand.
- 40,000 employees in California walked out; 8,000 (mainly female) employees of nursery schools and primary schools went on strike for two days in Glasgow, Scotland.
- In September, 20,000 women demonstrated in Bern, Switzerland, for equal wages.
- On 2 November there was a coordinated strike day at Google in Asia, Europe, and North America against discrimination and sexism at the workplace.

The militant women's movement has become active **in the whole range of issues relating to life and work**: wages, pensions, combating poverty, childcare, health care, nursing care and, last but not least, the protection of the natural environment are the focal points.

- The **fight against violence against women** has become the **object of mass protests**. Under the slogan #NiUnaMenos ("Not one [woman] less") half a million took to the streets, first in Argentina, then in neighboring countries and the entire region. In Argentina one woman

dies every 30 hours because of domestic violence; but in Germany also: one every 58 hours.

- Under the slogan #MeToo a whole system of sexual assaults behind the glamorous façade of Hollywood, but also in the European Parliament and elsewhere, was exposed and demands for public consequences were raised.
- All around the world millions of women fight for their right to self-determined abortion. In Poland and Turkey, the mass protests were the cause of major defeats of the ultra-reactionary PiS government in 2016 and the fascist Erdogan regime.

**The struggles are getting more political, are directed against the policies of rightist governments, against fascism and war:**

- The Women's March of 5 million against Trump, the anti-women US president, against sexism and racism became the largest manifestation in US history since the protests against the Vietnam War.
- In Turkey the "Saturday Mothers" have been demonstrating for 714 weeks to clear up the crimes their children have fallen victims to.
- In Iran strong workers' struggles link up with the political struggle against the fascist regime. Women courageously join the struggles and protest against forced veiling.
- In Brazil hundreds of thousands of women demonstrated against the fascist and extremely anti-women candidate Bolsonaro.

Such **movements** are especially remarkable which are directed not only against the problems created by capitalism and feudalism, but which attack the whole system of double exploitation and oppression of the masses of women and **demand**

## **and represent societal alternatives:**

- The Banghor movement, under the leadership of Sharmista among others, is fighting for land, the foundations of life, ecology and the protection of the environment.
- We have witnessed how the Women's Defense Units in Rojava played a leading role in the fight for the liberation from fascist IS/Daesh, that they not "only" prevented a rollback, but also achieved significant steps forwards towards the liberation of women, for democracy and freedom!
- With pride we look back at **two World Women's Conferences of grassroots women**. Women from four continents exchanged and discussed their opinions – in a self-organized and self-financed way, on a democratic basis, and without affiliation to parties, open for a liberated society. We have grown together and become a world women's movement.
- Many **revolutionary organizations** fighting for the cause of the liberation of women have developed, gotten stronger, and joined their forces, for example in the ICOR.

Dear women,

When I just said that we have grown into a world women's movement there is still **no reason to be self-satisfied**.

- We have wonderful conferences – but real, sustained practical cooperation and coordination is developed only in single cases, as in the solidarity with Joly or Sharmista. But this is the true yardstick!
- We elect wonderful women – but in reality only a few of them are really working continuously and responsibly.
- Of course, the work in our own countries is the basis for the worldwide process. But regarding the dialectics

of national and international work, we must **definitely invest more efforts in international work**. Because our adversary is a highly organized imperialist world system.

- While self-confidence has been growing, while there is a huge range of women's struggles, at the same time there is a **serious underestimation of the necessary society-changing orientation** of this movement, as **school of a struggle with the perspective of liberated societies, a struggle for socialism and communism**.

The women's movement must learn to understand that the special exploitation and oppression of the masses of the women is deeply rooted, is inherent in capitalism and imperialism, and that for this reason it must become part of a society-changing movement.

As long as capitalism exists – and today it exists in all countries worldwide – the laws of capitalism are effective: it is by no means based merely on the exploitation of wage labor. This is a reformist interpretation, which only demands a fairer redistribution as solution within the system.

No, right from the beginning **capitalism is based on the inseparable unity of exploitation of humankind and nature on the one hand, and on the bourgeois state and family system on the other**. These are two sides of the same coin.

The **social foundation for the liberation of women can only be created through a revolutionary solution**. A revolution which enforces a different basic line for work and life in society: instead of exploitation of humankind and nature, instead of rule of a tiny minority over the majority of society, instead of double exploitation and oppression of the masses of women – a life in harmony of humankind and nature, liberation of women, and prospects for youth; suppression only of the tiny minority which wants to restore the old conditions of exploitation, patriarchy, and destruction of the environment.

Dear friends and comrades,

The struggle for the liberation of women has been going on for thousands of years, because there were always women who did not resign themselves to being discriminated. But never before in the history of humankind have the same good preconditions existed, as they do today, to realize, organized worldwide, our goals and dreams. Because the liberation of women requires societal conditions of high labor productivity which enable work, food, education, health, humans living together, culture, social commitment, and relationships based on love. All this without the family as compulsory economic unit, and without a romantic return to the social relations of primitive society.

**Revolutions have been locomotives in the struggle for the liberation of women.** In 1871 the Paris Commune achieved first attempts at the liberation of women; as equals, women were at the barricades. 101 years ago the socialist October Revolution in Russia took place; it carried through women's rights to an extent women in many countries around the world are still dreaming of today. A hundred years ago there was the socialist November Revolution in Germany, which ended the First World War, chased away the Kaiser, introduced the 8-hour workday and women's suffrage.

These historical facts also show that all conceptions are untrue that claim that the liberation of women is a struggle by women alone. On the contrary, the **greatest successes for women have actually been achieved through revolutionary united action with a simultaneous independent women's movement.**

A struggle with clear goals requires strategy and tactics with clear goals, with scientifically substantiated theoretical foundations.

Marx, Engels, and Lenin were great pioneering thinkers of the

liberation of the working class from exploitation and oppression **AND** the liberation of women! They revealed the fundamental identity of the revolutionary struggle for the social liberation of the working class with the struggle for the liberation of women.

1. Marx and Engels developed the **twofold conception of production** in the work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Frederick Engels wrote in 1884:

*“According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.”* (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* in three volumes, Vol. 3, p. 191)

Determining factors in society according to this are always the level of development of **labor**, on the one hand (that is, production and reproduction of means of subsistence, tools/machines, etc.) and, on the other hand, the **family** (in which the production and reproduction of human life itself takes place). Both kinds of production and reproduction are inseparably connected with each other in a specific, characteristic way in the different social formations.

Marx's and Engels' political economy is characterized by revealing and analyzing, behind the commodity relations, the conditions and relations of people and classes that exist in the respective societies. Reducing political economy to production and reproduction in the field of work/of factories is, in contrast, typical of capitalist political economy. The capitalist is interested mainly in this kind of production and reproduction, in which the exploitation of labor takes place;



this field is the direct source of his maximum profits. To him, human life is of interest chiefly as a source of new labor. But the responsibility for this is to be borne by the bourgeois individual family, and in this family by the women.

Opposing the Political Economy of Marxism established by Marx and Engels were Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, theorists of revisionism around that time. They denied the twofold conception of production. This revision of Marxist fundamentals had a clear motive – reconciliation with the capitalist system. A further concrete motive was the personal, stuffy, petty-bourgeois or even bourgeois way of life of the reformist and revisionist leaders. It was based on having their wives dutifully manage life for them, raise the children, and, to top it off, idolize their vain husbands.

The twofold conception of production was ignored later on also in the communist movement. Criticism of capitalism was reduced to criticism of the exploitation of wage labor in the factories. This gave rise to economist tendencies in the working-class movement, to a one-sided concern with wage and working conditions. All the societal relations, the bourgeois state and family system, were left untouched in tendency. That had the effect to abandon the basic revolutionary position of struggle for the liberation of women. The struggle was reduced to campaigning for equality or including women in production.

Often this combined with treating the exploitation of wage labor as “principal contradiction” and the issue of women as “non-principal contradiction”. The solution of the so-called non-principal contradiction then preferably was deferred to future socialist relations.

## **2. The double exploitation of the masses of wage- and salary-dependent women:**

As an effect of petty-bourgeois feminism, there is a

widespread view that women are exploited, first, by the capitalist in the workplace and, second, by the man or husband and unpaid family work. However, family work is not capitalist exploitation, as production is for one's own needs and not for exchange.

Marxism reveals the social reality: The double exploitation of the masses of women consists, firstly, in the exploitation to which the woman worker is subject as part of the general working class, and secondly, in the even lower grading of her labor power compared with her male colleagues. The capitalist places a lower value on the labor power of women because, based on the bourgeois family system, it is not available to him for exploitation on the same scope as that of the man, since the woman bears the main responsibility for child raising and housework/family work. That is the case the world over. Women get 20 to 30 percent lower wages than men. In Germany they get 23 percent less.

In the book, *New Perspectives for the Liberation of Women*, we wrote:

*"The real cause both of the exploitation of wage-workers and of the double exploitation of the masses of wage- and salary-dependent women lies in capitalist wage labor. When production is no longer for profit but for the satisfaction of the needs of society, only then can the differences in the valuation of social productive labor and private housework disappear, too. The unscientific petty-bourgeois criticism of the double exploitation of women leads to the division of men and women and denies the **necessity of overcoming capitalism and of abolishing the family as an economic unit and the private organization of human life.**" (p. 37)*

3. The **special oppression affects all women**, not just women workers. The special oppression of women even is a

fundamental element of all rule in class societies based on exploitation and oppression. This special oppression includes:

- The system-inherent responsibility of women for private household and family management, which also leads to an economic dependence on men
- The control over sexuality, and violence against women
- A whole system of “chains of bourgeois morality” which take effect through traditions, role assignments, religions, moral values
- Manifold forms of gender discrimination
- Sexism as a method of destroying the self-confidence of women and girls

**All women and girls in society are affected by this special oppression, even if they do not belong to the working class – the woman worker, the woman farmer, female academics, female students, even bourgeois women.**

This fact is also the basis for the possibility of the emergence of an independent, militant women’s movement that embraces women of all classes and strata.

It was a historical mistake of the former communist movement in its work among women to restrict it in tendency to proletarian women. Nevertheless, great things were achieved in this area. However, neglecting petty-bourgeois and bourgeois women left them to the influence of the bourgeoisie. In Germany they became an essential mass base of Hitlerite fascism. Particularly in view of the worldwide development to the right, this is an important historical lesson to heed: to strengthen the necessary broad, militant union of the women’s movement across party lines. That also is an element of the foundation of our successful world women’s movement.

**4. The claim of gender equality has become one of the**

**central myths of capitalist societies.** Formal equality is, of course, a hard-fought-for, enormous historic advance – nevertheless, the text of the law and reality are worlds apart. That is no coincidence, but will always remain so within the capitalist system despite all necessary struggles.

Only in a socialist society do the conditions for the liberation of women exist. Marx and Engels characterized these conditions as follows:

***“firstly, social production, completely geared to satisfying human needs;***

***secondly, participation on equal footing by all family members in social production, each according to his or her abilities;***

***thirdly, the relationship of economic dependence between family member is eliminated;***

***fourthly, the family ceases to be the basic economic unit on which all personal life is based;***

***fifthly, housework and the care and education of children become public tasks of society.”*** (New Perspectives, p. 199)

During the **construction of socialism in the Soviet Union**, far-reaching socialist legislation was adopted and mass mobilization undertaken for the liberation of women – a gigantic step forward of world-historical dimensions was made with the establishment of kindergartens, nurseries, laundry facilities and repair shops; marriage was made a private affair; there were protective rights for women, a simple divorce law, and a progressive criminal law on sexual offenses. There was a diversified system of women’s delegates.

On the issue of the liberation of women, from the outset of socialist construction a struggle raged over the mode of thinking; patriarchal and feudal influences had to be

overcome. Mistakes also were made, as with the Soviet family laws of 1936 in Stalin's time.

Out of the conscious processing of successes and errors the opportunity grows for a new upsurge of the struggle for the liberation of women in a liberated society. The polemic, *New Perspectives for the Liberation of Women*, drew conclusions:

*"Socialist society cannot make the liberation of women reality through decrees. Rather, this involves a more or less **protracted revolutionary process of transforming the entire production relations and conditions of life in society.** This process goes on in interaction with the changes in the forms of consciousness and the political structures in which the dictatorship of the proletariat finds specific expression at each stage."* (p. 199)

Dear friends, dear comrades,

The **main obstacle** to the development of a broad, militant women's movement is the **corrosive effect of the system of the petty-bourgeois mode of thinking!** The petty-bourgeois mode of thinking pretends to be critical of society, but with its basic anticommunist orientation aims at the preservation and perpetuation of capitalism and imperialism. A part of this system of the petty-bourgeois mode of thinking is petty-bourgeois feminism.

Petty-bourgeois feminism criticizes the real social inequality between men and women. Its answer to this is the battle of the sexes. It spreads the illusion that social equality is achievable by fighting the "dominance of men". This made petty-bourgeois feminism valuable for those in power: they integrated it in bourgeois society, seemingly providing an answer to the justified criticisms while channeling these in the opposite direction towards maintenance of the system.

Petty-bourgeois feminism has made the women's movement in the entire world susceptible to efforts to integrate it in the bourgeois institutions. Many active women have been absorbed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) financed and controlled by imperialist institutions.

This is ***"a counterstrategy of the ruling powers against the struggle for the real emancipation of women, and against proletarian class struggle to overcome the system of capitalist exploitation and oppression"*** (*New Perspectives*, p. 102).

However, in forming our own theory we must also deal critically and self-critically with influences of the petty-bourgeois feminist mode of thinking. Yesterday we heard a presentation from the Kurdish women's movement on the ideology of women's liberation. The Kurdish movement and its leader Abdullah Öcalan undoubtedly have achieved great successes on the road to the liberation of women. Had Öcalan not developed such an awareness of the woman question with analyses, texts, and mass education, and were it not for the resolute measures taken by the entire movement to promote women, the great successes of the Rojava revolution would not have been possible. However, the theory of jineology (the science of women) is virtually the simple negation of the economist assertion that the liberation of society can be achieved solely through elimination of the exploitation of the workers.

One of the key theses of the introductory speech of the Kurdish women's movement, published on the Internet, is: "Woman's question as primary conflict". This is justified by saying: *"Women are the most oppressed race, nation or class. All other forms of enslavement have been implemented on the basis of housewifisation."* And the conclusion is drawn *"that true revolutions must be female."* In fact, however, the present capitalist system is not based "only" on the oppression of women, rather this oppression is the inseparable counterpart to the exploitation of wage labor. Workers, male

and female, stand in antagonistic contradiction to this system, are highly organized, and are the most effective and leading force in the struggle against imperialism. At the international level this is the most highly organized force and carrier of the modern productive forces. To negate the working class, comprising some three billion people in the world today, its growing size and importance, and instead to declare "*woman's awakening and being the leading societal force in this historical scene*", is not only rather arrogant, but unscientific as well, and out of touch with reality.

Secondly, in the theses it is emphasized: "*Overcoming masculinity as a system must be the fundamental principle of socialism.*" Citing Marxist classics as well, it is emphasized in the discussion that today the woman represents the proletariat and the man the capitalist. This is a falsification of Engels' scientific analysis. He wrote:

*"The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman; and modern society is a mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules. Today, in the great majority of cases, the man has to be the earner, the bread-winner of the family, at least among the propertied classes, and this gives him a dominating position which requires no special legal privileges. In the family, he is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat."* ("The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," 1884, Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* in three volumes, Vol. 3, p. 247)

The man as bourgeois, the wife as proletariat thus refers to the reactionary bourgeois family system. Applying this to the overall social relations or the society-changing movement would mean to make this reactionary family system the model for society as a whole. This thesis is, not least of all, a petty-bourgeois claim to leadership by the women's movement that would only lead to weakening and splitting the entire movement. To realize this does not by any means belittle the

strategic and important role of women for the revolution. On the contrary, the women's movement must be a strong, independent force that is a link between the movements.

Dear friends, dear comrades!

From all of this follows the **fundamental importance** of the dialectics between **revolutionary party-building** and **non-party-affiliated, self-run organizations** and movements in the work among women, as the fundamental relation in the struggle for the liberation of women. A decisive criterion today whether parties really live up to their revolutionary claim is whether they champion the struggle for the liberation of women in word and deed. Whether every member – man and woman – is committed to this in word and deed. Whether they practice systematic promotion of women and actually qualify women in leading functions.

On the other hand, women's organizations and women's movements will only be strong in reality when party affiliation and party-based fragmentation are overcome and all forces are combined across party lines.

That is why I am very happy that this seminar has become reality – it is a genuine novelty in the militant international women's movement that, in particular, grassroots women from all over the world have embarked on it!

May it be a great success. I wish you an exciting discussion!