

The Origins of International Women's Day

Born at a time of great social turbulence and crisis, International Womens Day (IWD) inherited a tradition of protest and political activism.

In the years before 1910, from the turn of the 20th century, women in industrially developing countries were entering paid work in some numbers. Their jobs were sex segregated, mainly in textiles, manufacturing and domestic services where conditions were wretched and wages worse than

depressed. Trade unions were developing and industrial disputes broke out, including among sections of non-unionised women workers.

Many of the changes taking place in women's lives pushed against the political restrictions surrounding them. Throughout Europe, Britain, America and, to a lesser extent, Australia, women from all social strata began to campaign for the right to vote.

In the United States in 1903, women

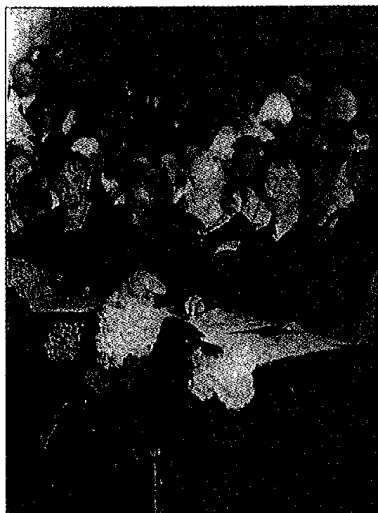
trade unionists and liberal professional women who were also campaigning for women's voting rights set up the Women's Trade Union League to help organise women in paid work around their political and economic welfare. These were dismal and bitter years for many women with terrible working conditions and home lives driven by poverty and often violence.

In 1908, on the last Sunday in February, socialist women in the United States initiated the first Women's Day when large demonstrations took place calling for the vote and the political and economic rights of women. The following year, 2,000 people attended a Women's Day rally in Manhattan.

In that year, 1909, women garment workers staged a general strike. 20-30,000 shirtwaist makers struck for 13 cold, winter weeks for better pay and working conditions. The Women's Trade Union League provided bail money for arrested strikers and large sums for strike funds.

In 1910 Women's Day was taken up by socialists and feminists throughout the country. Later that year delegates went to the second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen with the intention of proposing that Women's Day become an international event. The notion of international solidarity between the exploited workers of the world had long been established as a socialist principle, though largely an

A poster promoting the 1978 IWD march in Sydney, Australia. The poster draws attention to a number of issues, one of particular relevance in Australia (support for Aboriginal rights) and others of international significance (social security, solidarity, anti-rascism and cultural diversity).



[above] Leading campaigners of the international women's movement, Alexandra Kollontai (right) and Clara Zetkin (second right), at the International Women's Conference, Copenhagen, 1921.

[below] During periods of rapid social change women's roles and forms of work are often transformed. These English women worked as railway engine cleaners in 1941, a time of war and severe labour shortages in Europe.



unrealised one. The idea of women organising politically as women was much more controversial within the workers movement.

Inspired by the actions of US women workers on strike, Clara Zetkin, a leading member of the social democrats, framed a proposal at the Copenhagen conference that women throughout the world should focus on a particular day each year to press for their demands.

The conference of over 100 women from 17 countries, representing unions, socialist parties, working women's clubs, and including the first three women elected to the Finnish parliament, greeted Zetkin's suggestion with unanimous approval and International Women's Day was established.

That conference also reasserted the importance of women's right to vote, dissociated itself from voting systems based on property rights and called for universal suffrage - the right to vote for all adult women and men

The conference also called for maternity benefits which, despite an intervention by Russian Alexandra Kollontai on behalf of unmarried mothers, were to be for married women only. It also decided to oppose night work as being detrimental to the health of most

working women, though Swedish and Danish working women who were present asserted that night work was essential to their livelihood.

First International Womens day

The first IWD was held on March 19, 1911 in Germany, Austria, Denmark and some other European countries. This date was chosen by German women because, on that date in 1848, the Prussian king, faced with an armed uprising, had promised many reforms, including an unfulfilled promise to give women the right to vote. A million leaflets calling for action on the right to vote were distributed throughout Germany before IWD in 1911.

Undoubtedly, the most memorable IWD was held in Petrograd (now St Petersburg) in March 1917. Although women textile workers had been urged to refrain from striking on IWD even when workers were locked out of their factories on March 7 the women of Petrograd began to storm the streets.

The wives, daughters and mothers of soldiers, previously as downtrodden and oppressed as prostitutes, demanded an end to their humiliation and angrily denounced all the hungry suffering of the past three years. Gathering strength and passion as they swept

through the city over the next few days in political strikes and demonstrations, these women helped defeat the autocratic rule of the Tzar.

(Source: Asian Food Workers vol30 no3: adapted from material originally written by Joyce Stevens and appearing at www.isis.aust.com/iwd/stevens/contents.htm)

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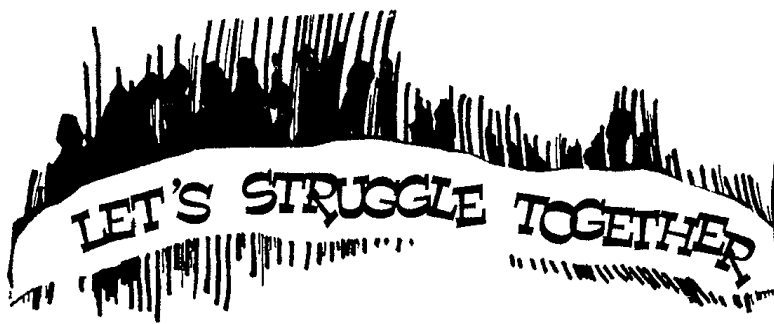
collective bargaining, the Kalape Api also devotes much of its energy and time to attend to individual workers grievances and trade dispute and it has been able to settle most of these cases to the advantage of workers.

It is indeed admirable, and a cue for the male dominated trade union arena, that an ordinary country girl isolated by the society, with so many difficulties in her life has come through and handles problems that even males shy away from. Her courageous leadership and the honesty to the cause for which she fights so vigorously and fiercely though confronted by the powerful government repressive machinery and the mighty employer network, she is now emerging as an international figure in the preservation of workers rights.

(Source: WITZ Vol1 No1 February 2001, Published by Kalape Api)



International Women's Day in Asia



Hong Kong

In view of the persistent structural unemployment and deteriorating employment conditions, the Hong Kong Women Workers Association staged a protest on the International Women's Day to remind the public and the government of the need to respect and protect women's labour.

Despite the century long demand for 8 hours of work, women workers in the food-catering and sales industries in Hong Kong are working 10 hours a day. And an increasing number of women who in recent years begin to be employed as security guards in public housing estates even have to work of 12 hours a day.

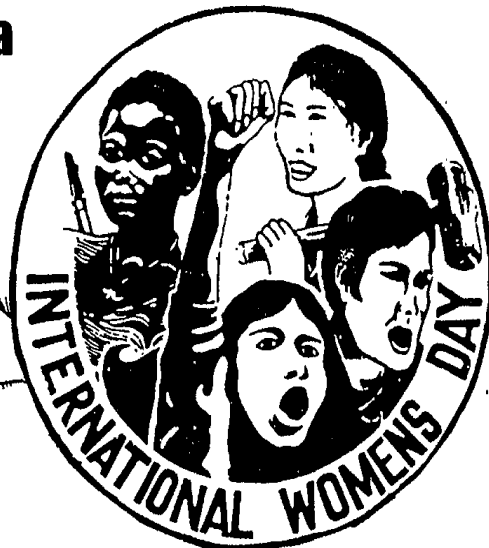
Along with the trend of long working hours, women workers in Hong Kong have to increasingly endure suppressed wages and casualized employment. The wage gap between men and women remains wide, especially among the unskilled workers where women's average wage is only half of that of men. Women constitutes 83% of the working poor.

With the prevalence of age discrimination, the only jobs seem to be open to mid-aged women

workers are cleaners and home-helpers. And what the government retraining scheme does is just to perpetuate this reality. In stead of solidly resolving women workers' problems in the labour market, the government's only concern is reducing its budget in social welfare - cutting assistance to unemployed workers and single mothers. Thus under the banner of 'self-reliance', women in need of public assistance are increasingly subjected to dehumanizing procedures and rising pressure for re-entry into the exploitative labour market without due regards to their needs and problems.

To improve women workers' employment conditions, the Hong Kong Women Workers Association demands that:

- 1) Stipulation of a minimum wage to ensure reasonable remuneration for women's labour.
- 2) Amend the labour law to ensure women under casualized employment are also protected.
- 3) Legislate against age discrimination to ensure equal employment opportunities for mid-aged women workers.
- 4) Expand public expenditure on



welfare especially in child-minding and services for the aged to relieve women's burden and expand job options for women workers.

Besides public protest, the HKWWA also took the initiative to co-organize a singing and dancing party to commemorate the Women's Day. Jointly organized by 10 women's organizations, the party aimed to create a space to allow women to let go of their worries and burden for a while, to attend to own needs for recreation and expression through body movements, songs and music.

Korea

Korean Women Workers Association United (KWAWU) together with Korean Women's Trade Union organised rallies in 9 major cities as part of the celebration of International Women's Day.

이날까지 차병정씨! 복수요청소통자 근무가끝낸 차병정씨!

