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Idealist Duties of Women in the Workers' Movement

Anonymous

1908

We must demand of ourselves more than we demand from others. Others, if they are somewhat decent people, cannot and dare not preach us our most sacred, and hardest to fulfil, duties; so we need to remind them ourselves; we will fulfil them with as much less pain.

It goes without saying that men and women who work form a common movement to make human labour free; they both have a common interest not to betray each other but to help each other in every struggle. If men go on strike in a factory, it would be silly for women to stay and make a movement fail when it could have been useful to them as well if it had won – we are beyond this; have we not seen this summer, in Switzerland and Austria, men remain at work while we fought in the streets? It would be silly as well if we didn't care about preparing for a strike, if we didn't ensure we had a bit of bread for the times of struggle, and if we left all this task to men; also, in Switzerland, for the past few years, thousands of us have joined trade unions and in those unions we have fulfilled our duties just like our male comrades.

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When we are only housewives, duties appear less equal than they are. It is true that there are some housewives who, when their husbands are on strike, only lament and put their crying children in front of the house when their father comes back. But these discouraging wives who, making their partners falter, support the work of the bosses are increasingly rarer. In most cases, housewives, during a strike, put on their aprons resolutely and work all day so that their children will have something to eat and so that the family can support the father's strike. I know some women who, on their own, have cared for their families during months of struggle and who, through atrocious work, have remedied the father's imprudence who had never been a member of the union, who preferred to buy a couple of pints rather than pay his dues which would have given them a bit of bread during the struggle.

On the other hand, since we are always told that there are some stupid women and that no-one speaks of the sacrifices of brave women, we wish to remind people that there are some stupid men too, who have beaten and abused their wives because they went on strike.

There are stupid people of both sexes, but, fortunately, the number of conscious and intelligent people grows daily, people who fight together and help each other are always more numerous.

And now it is not of the duties we have commonly with men, but of the extra duties we have as women that we wish to talk.

With young workers and child workers, women form the lowest social class.

Despised by the state, exploited by bosses, treated as a cruel woman by our family, tormented by children, we live the most painful lives we can imagine. And, what's more, women – especially older women – have no hope to leave this misery. The years during which we are flattered are too soon over. Nappies and other duties soon make us yellow and ugly; then no-one looks at us any more; in order for people to listen to us, we change our sweet voices

into shrilling voices and the result is that our relations cover their ears or flee to the pub.

Well, after this bite of sad and bitter realism, we are going to talk about our particular idealist duties.

The lower classes are carrying the weight of those above them. People from higher social strata therefore have an interest to negotiate with each other since their situation is not so bad as to lose all hope. And because it is not impossible for them to find an agreement – always at the detriment of the classes below them. This is how highly qualified workers manage to make deals with bosses in the following way: you pay us a salary of 8 to 10 francs a day; we help you raise the price of the product (of the watch, for example) by voting a protectionist right; but you promise not to hire our female competitors; however, we promise not to allow auxiliary workers (women especially) in our unions, not to give them the strong support of our comfortable funds.

This happened not long ago in our Switzerland, that enlightened democratic country, whose history tells us that women dressed up as men to chase the foreign lords, commonly with their husbands, their fathers and their sons.

Well, us, women, who are the lowest class and who have no real hope to gain a truly happy life through contracts with all the social classes who dominate us, we have the duty to prevent the union movement to become a movement of more or less well-fed men, blindly following their own economic interests.

We must, as women, as auxiliary workers most of the time, explain to these men that it is an abomination for a worker to procure himself some economic advantages at the detriment of his comrade the auxiliary, who, for a lack of time and money, didn't have the chance to learn a trade.

We must, as female workers, moving from one trade to the other, hired yesterday in a watch-making workshop, tomorrow in a food-related branch, we must explain to comrades that we cannot just safeguard the interests of our own trade, but that the proletariat

needs inter-professional solidarity and that, given the change from human labour to machine labour, from skilled work to auxiliary work, this inter-professional solidarity becomes more and more indispensable every day.

As female industrial workers, we have to remind our unionised comrades constantly that a union movement pursuing purely economical improvements, and pursuing them without caring about comrades who are not “of their trade” becomes a pointless movement which will end up turning against the proletariat itself by oppressing the lower social classes, and dividing the proletariat into, on the one hand, a proletarian aristocracy, and, on the other, the outcast.

We must, as women who buy all kinds of things, that we explain to our husbands disgruntled with our spending that it is a betrayal if the workers of a trade agree with their bosses on raising the price of a product, that workers of every trade mutually annihilate their success in this way, and that only the bosses benefit from proletarian blindness.

We must, as housewives, explain to our comrades that in order to endure and win a fight of principles against all our common bosses, we must have bread and milk during the struggle so that the cries of the children do not drown the fires of enthusiasm. We must push them to create food banks, cooperative bakeries and dairy farms, to take back our consumers’ societies from private capital so that one day, during a strike, our shops will be able to give credit to the families on strike.

As citizens, we must remind our comrades, who are often so proud of “our democracy”, that political freedom without economic freedom is an illusion.

Let’s remind them that we do not have democratic rights, us women, and that yet our situation as political pariahs hardly differs from their own. If they are proud of their fatherland, of the colours they wear, let’s reply with what a Parisian woman – I can’t recall her name – told when she was sent the red ribbon of the Légion

d’Honneur: “Us women wear the ribbons we please, and we choose colours which match our tone.”

Whatever the idol that our male comrade venerates because he is closer to the ruling classes than we are, let’s critique these idols, and help men to destroy them – like he helped us destroy those which intimidated us.