

War and Feminism

Madeleine Pelletier

1919

Our small "Suffragist" was not published during the war.

A wind of madness blew over Europe; men believed they had nothing left better to do than to kill each other.

Cheap authors used, in order to feed hatred, their talents which did not increase for it; scientists worked to discover the product which would kill most assuredly and quickly the largest number of people possible. We achieved to be able to kill you from a three hour train journey away.

What chances did the cry for justice of the individual oppressed by society in the name of a stupid sex prejudice have to be heard?

But wars have proved many calculations wrong, and, at this game, the ruling classes have not won. The proletariat was becoming unruly; throughout Europe, its organisations were growing and the bourgeoisie, worried by nature, had even greater fear than there was danger for them. During a couple of years, war was prepared, and a futile pretence, when compared to its consequences, triggered the cataclysm. The proletariats which had sworn to stand united let themselves be led once more to carnage by their masters. French people shouted "A Berlin!" Germans shouted "Nach Paris!" Guillaume invoked his old God; our priests held mass on the front line and international capitalism salivated, sure that the good old days would come back, with its cheap labour, and workers back on the deserted pews of the Church.

Workers' demands are now more demanding than ever. The people was shouting, but it was afraid of battle; the bourgeoisie taught it to kill. War overthrew kings, it unleashes social revolution everywhere and obtains for women both fundamental demands of our "Suffragist": the right to vote and the right to work.

War needed women. In days of old, wars only took from the nation a tiny part of its producers; the need for a labour force was hardly felt, therefore, wives could use their time tearing sheets to make bandages. This time, whole nations had to be enrolled, and since, even to kill, people must live, eat, be dressed, etc., production demanded from women the contingents it no longer had.

It is certainly with a heavy heart that rulers agreed to it; on this issue, our self-proclaimed avant-garde nation was very inferior to the hated Germany. About driving tramways, people have recycled the old objections of my youth to female medicine students: women have no self-control, they will have accidents, and so on.

Women gave the tempo: the long “Montrouge-Gare de l’Est”, the huge “Malkoff-Les Halles” obeyed the moves of the frail female tramway drivers, graceful hands seized the heavy hands of the signal box and the freeing hook of the famous breakdown.

Those who were believed to be only good to mend rags have forged iron; they turned the heavy bombshells; fearless, they combined picric acid to turn it into the terrible melinite, and passers-by could see them walk the street all in yellow.

Less demanding jobs which men had kept to themselves, not wanting to share the money given by independence, had to be offered to women because of the circumstances. We saw some graceful post-women with their red-brim caps, female gas controllers, delivery girls in the right uniform in department stores. In a hostile society, women conquered their place bit by bit; the female worker succeeded to the housewife and the courtesan.

There are however a couple of dark spots on this encouraging picture. The courtesan is too old not to reappear from time to time under the worker, some hospitals had the appearance of brothels; civil servants spent their work time flirting and powdering themselves, to the great joy of anti-feminists. The female workers, suddenly astonished by fantastic wages, not really knowing what to do with this money which was suddenly available to them, like in fairy tales, spent it any old way: expensive shoes, perfume, silk tights, the old feminine vanity; men would have spent it on gambling or cheap wine. Only the elites are worthy of freedom; the mass, who only knows its instincts, always starts with excesses; in the long run, however, it all balances out. Therefore, we must not focus on these details, as bad as they can seem: only the larger picture matters.

The feminist conclusion of this war, is that women can accomplish in a satisfactory manner any intellectual or manual work. She only has to be freed: she will be, because people will be forced to free her.

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Retrieved on 10th September 2021 from forgottenanarchism.wordpress.com
Published in *La Suffragiste*.

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