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The Organisation of proletarian women in Switzerland

Margarethe Faas-Hardegger

1907

Proletarian women are women who work for any master. That her master is called the State, a corporation, a shareholders' company, a manufacturer, a boss or a husband, it doesn't matter!

Whether her work uses a machine, her arms or her brains; whether it is considered work or "an occupation attributed to women because of their sex"; whether it is paid or not, it doesn't matter!.. Every woman and girl who works for someone else's profit is a proletarian woman.

All proletarian women's interests lay in getting rid of the yoke or yokes on their shoulders. And since they do not have the strength to conquer individually – in isolation – their full personal freedom, they must organise, they need all the women interested in this emancipatory struggle to unite in societies and fight collectively.

Women who first understood the need to fight were the factory and workshop workers: those who have a job. The

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first masters that they were able to perceive were their bosses, the manufacturers, the shareholder's companies. The first women's organisations were trade unions, societies to fight against their bosses, the manufacturers, and the shareholder's companies.

During many years, in Switzerland – like in the other countries – workers by trade have excluded women from their corporations, hoping to get rid of female competition.

Faced with this exclusion, some conscious women, including Comrade Clara Zetkin and Comrade Guillaume-Jacques, created in Switzerland the first groups of working women, the German Swiss Arbeiterinnen-Vereines.

But, for about 20 years now, the workers have changed their exclusive methods and have opened the doors of their organisations to women. Today, they are only two organisations excluding women remaining in Switzerland: one category of clock-makers and typographers.

Since more and more female workers could join their male colleagues' organisation, the old working women's groups declined slowly in importance and necessity. They were even becoming competitor organisations and bones of contention, when, in 1905, all these women's groups called Arbeiterinnen-Vereine were united in a Swiss federation of proletarian women, the Schweizerische Arbeiterinnen-Verband, which, in its statutes, decided the issue of organised vis a vis trade organisations. Nowadays, this federation counts among its members almost all the women and girls working in households, all the servants and the hotel and restaurant staff, etc.

The Swiss federation of proletarian women leaves the largest possible autonomy to its sections; it does not draw on any centralising and authoritarian tactics. Each section deals with the issue they find most interesting, and in the method they find best. Some dealt with work from home and the protection of children forced to work; the others with the

neo-malthusian issue and organised insurance funds against maternity costs; others have opened communist schools and kindergartens where children are educated outside the influence of the Church and capital; others still created sewing or cooking schools for female workers; some others have organised previously unreachable categories of workers, such as servants; others, finally, have offered to educate their members so that the young women could themselves become propagandists and go everywhere to sow the grain of revolt and implant the desire of a new society which would correspond to our needs as working women.

In the year 1905, monthly dues of the federation were fixed at 10 centimes per member. In 1906, these dues were raised to 20 centimes, since the newspaper, compulsory for every member, *Die Vorkämpferin*, was going to be published. A year later – on May 1st 1907, was created *la Vorkämpferin* in French – *L'Exploitée*. Now, thanks to the contributions of all our generous comrades, the small *Exploitée*, after its six months of existence, prints the same number of copies as its German Swiss sister.

The only thing left is a sister French Swiss organisation to give *L'Exploitée* its character as a proletarian work.

In several parts of French Swiss, there is, among proletarian women, an intense desire to organise. Many comrades are ready to join the Swiss movement of exploited women.

In its special meeting on October 3rd, the committee of the Swiss federation of proletarian women was informed of the current situation. The German-speaking female comrades gave me the task express to their comrades and friends of French Swiss the joy they feel at seeing them unite for the same struggle.

If never-ending workdays and absolute poverty hadn't delayed or almost destroyed our education, we could now join in the same federation, since we have the same desires. But, unfortunately, the women of part of Switzerland do not know

the language of the other part, and even though the same will drives us, we are unable to communicate directly.

The comrades from the committee of the German Swiss federation thought it would be above their strength to do the necessary communication with the different French-speaking sections, and, since they do not want to see them remain orphans, they offer to the French-speaking sections to create a French-speaking centre – a French-speaking committee for a French-speaking federation. Thus the relations between sections will be guaranteed. And there is no danger that the sister federations should drift apart since our newspapers are following the same tactics.

As for the administrative question, we need to get the most effect from the means we have. And, in order to save French-speaking comrades much spending, the Swiss federation of proletarian women would like to offer you its statutes. But they have printed their statutes for the Italian-speaking comrades last year, and right now the little money left doesn't allow to print a French version. It will have to wait until next year.

In the meantime, they offer you membership cards – a card on which the main points from the statutes are printed, and can provisionally be used to keep track of the payment of dues and the contribution to funds.

As for our struggle, each organisation will lead it on the field of its choosing and according to the tactics it deems best. One single condition though: all our actions must be based on the principle of class struggle.

This means that we, proletarian women, have nothing in common with the women who do not work. And our movement has nothing to do with the movement of the women who live off the labour of others.

We declare war on every possible form of servitude, and a human society will only please us if everyone works according to their energy and talents, and everyone receives according to their needs.