

The Need for Women's Unions

Milly Witkop-Rocker

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That the support of several male comrades for the dissolution of the women's unions had to cause a storm of protests among our female comrades is natural. The women have come to realise that such organisations are necessary, and there she deals seriously with her issues, so we must not be surprised that she defends her point with energy. It would be very unfortunate if it weren't the case, it would only prove that women had less interest for their issues. Despite everything, it would be an injustice if those comrades, who are committed to the union of both men and women in the same united organisation, wanted to presume an evil intent. Without a doubt their motives stem from thinking and are perfectly honest in order to help the movement. However, not everything that is done meaning well is also good in practice and desirable, especially not in this case.

Before we called the women's unions into existence, we had well considered the question, and if we have decided in favour of the unions, it happened mainly because we wanted to reach out first and foremost to housewives and female relatives who are not considered directly as producers. It would be in my opinion a complete waste of time if we brought in these women in the general organisation, where they would have little opportunity to develop their own initiatives and they would end up most of the time playing the role of silent observers. In this way they would not be able to bring anything useful neither to the general movement, nor to themselves.

Some might object that so far women's unions have only achieved little result and have not brought many advantages to women. On its own, this reproach is not conclusive. Despite the decisions of the Düsseldorf and Erfurt congresses¹ which completely recognised the need for these unions and for supporting them, precious little has been done on this issue in the past five years. It would therefore be foolish to want to expect greater results. I do not wish to make a reproach against anyone when I say this, my words are conceived much more as a reminder that in this respect a lot more must be done.

But even so the little that was done did not remain without success. If today we have quite a number of women in the country who are able to represent effectively their own issues as well as the interests of the movement, this is a direct result from the women's unions that we would hardly have achieved without the existence of the unions. And that women have understood their duty, this comes out of the fact that in quite a few of the groups mutual aid has been practised in a way which could serve as a very good example also for male comrades. This however does not mean that we are content and that we reject any critique. On the contrary, it must be emphasised

over and over again that far too little has been done so far and that we must direct all of our power to create new groups and always better to build up and develop the existing ones. It would be however completely wrong if people wanted to reproach the women for not having done their duty, after the comrades have done theirs in their congress and taken resolutions in favour of women's unions. Could anyone not make the same reproach to the men? Most of them believed that after they put down the need for unions in a particular resolution, the thing would just happen by itself. The means, they took this issue a bit too lightly. Without a doubt it would be desirable the women had shown up in higher numbers, but the same can also be said of the male comrades. From those who are organised as syndicalists we could have expected with full justification that they would have stood by the women who were completely inexperienced in those areas.

Unfortunately, things are not going the way we wished and that's why we must be patient and not throw in the towel. The fact that something does not make as much progress as we wish does not say anything at all about its necessity. If that were the case, we should also assess all the work of the pioneers of the syndicalist movement in Germany as very modest, since they also did not get the success which they maybe had expected. And no-one will contest that men, who go every day to their workplaces, are much easier to reach than women who, withdrawn in their families, are much too difficult to influence with new ideas.

If someone talks about the little success of the women's unions, there is one circumstance they must not fail to mention: it is unfortunately an indisputable fact that a whole number of our comrades are anyway against their wives taking part in the movement. For a long time, especially in Germany, a deeply-ingrained prejudice played the lead role. The fear of having to warm up their evening bread themselves for once, if their wives attended a meeting, or just the dread that she could run away from them if she heard people speak about freedom or – God forbid – free love, often lead to really strange results. How laughable and petty as these objections should be, they nonetheless exist and are making the fight of women for their issues naturally all the harder. If we take all of this into consideration, we must not be surprised if the women's unions have not managed to reach any major results so far.

That women are realising they need to do something is unquestionable. It is the duty of our comrades to support this inclination and to develop it, instead of nipping it in the bud.

Let's treat women's unions not as something trivial, but as a part of the general movement. It would be ridiculous to think that a movement with such goals as the syndicalist movement's could ever reach those without the practical help of the women. Even the most conservative of men no longer dare to suggest this today. In the area of parliamentary politics, women have today become an important factor, and assuredly a scary reactionary factor, which doesn't surprise us in the least, as we could predict it. An element which for centuries has been kept in blindness and ignorance, and which is then given full representation to take decisions, even if only in appearance, in public affairs, must logically help to reinforce the ranks of the reaction.

We, on the other hand, who know that the duties of women just as those of men lie in an entirely different area, must use all means of propaganda to lead women onto a new path. We must get the message across to them that their field of action does not lie in the parliamentary area, but that her effectiveness lies first and foremost in cultural affairs and in the economic field, where she comes into consideration especially as a consumer and can serve the good of all through her influence.

Luckily people have also already undertaken other steps in this task elsewhere. Thus the English comrades are now strongly concerned with the issue of organising consumers into women's guilds, where they are trained and taught in all the issues of economic life.

The best experts are selected for this explanatory work which has shown remarkable results. We always come to the same conclusion that the economy is the most important factor of social life and that, especially in this matter, the involvement of women as consumers is of vital importance. We are therefore following the right path.

It would now be desirable if people also stood by us and not just in theory, but always determined themselves to go over to the work of cultural and economic education, in order to develop a larger work field for the women's unions, which could make them financially independent.

How would it be if we created, everywhere where there are women's unions, small consumers' leagues, which would then acquire bulk buy for their members, and use the profit which would thus be taken from the middleman for the spreading of our propaganda? In this way, the women's unions need not be a financial burden on the general movement and can at the same time do their propaganda and launch their initiative in these modest beginnings. Such experiments can lead to many consequences, about which I will not go into more details. The main point is that it is a start. To implement this suggestion, our women comrades must above all assemble where the women's groups are, to be clear on the details of the beginning, and to discover means and ways.

Above all else, we must have the will to do something. Everything else will then fall into place.

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