



# COMMUNIST WOMEN



## Welcome

Ruth Styles

Hello sisters and comrades!

I was elected as chair of the Communist Party at the first executive committee meeting following our Congress and I am grateful for the confidence shown by comrades in my ability to discharge this role. I have big shoes to fill, following the sterling work done by Liz Payne!

I also chair the housing and anti racist and anti fascist commissions of the party.

I was lucky: I was born into a communist household, with active trade unionist parents, my father was a prominent trade unionist in the Union of Postal Workers. My mother was a leading tenant and community campaigner and became the national women's organiser for the party. My formative years were heavily influenced by the experience of working class life and the political discussions and activity going on around me. I was taught to speak publicly and how to organise and manage meetings, even though I did not appreciate the importance of these things at the time.

Women have always played a key role in political work and have been the backbone of community organising in Britain, historically

campaigning around the key issues of the day and leading and organising workers. This essential role is amply demonstrated by the Russian and Cuban Revolutions. In Russia on February 23 1917, (8 March in our calendar), International Women's Day was marked by strikes and huge demonstrations of women.

The Bolshevik paper *Pravda* reported that this led to revolution: '...the first day of the revolution was Women's Day...the women... decided the destiny of the troops; they went to the barracks, spoke to the soldiers and the latter joined the revolution... Women, we salute you.'

Women were active in the revolutionary movement in Cuba, composing at least 10-15% of the Rebel Army fighters and taking a number of key leadership positions. In a speech on 1 January 1959, Fidel Castro proclaimed that "when a people has men who fight and women who can fight, that people are invincible."

Women in modern Britain have very busy lives, they juggle work, home, low pay, low household incomes, and all the pressures that present-day life places upon them. This often means that they have limited opportunity to engage in politics. They may also feel let down by a political system that does nothing to alleviate the struggles they experience. It was ever thus, yet women were and still are key

organisers in local communities, tenants organisations, and at their workplaces. They often do not take the roles that are in the public eye, but their work is central and crucial.

Women may know about the Suffragettes, but little about labour movement history and the important role that women have played to bring about change, e.g. the Match Girls strike or the Triang Factory strike – where they struck for equal pay.

The Communist Party in Britain is small, but growing. A party with a unique political programme and role to play in the labour movement. It is essential that we recruit more women members and have women in leading positions. This entails active, rather than passive, recruitment to show what communist policies offer women. We need to talk about working class women's history and we need to be where they are and not wait for them to come to us. The language and words we use are important – always accessible and understandable when explaining who we are and what we stand for.

We can never underestimate the value of working class women's experience. We can offer Marxist Leninist education and show that there is a way to end women's oppression and build a society where women have true equality. ★

## Charter for Women

The Communist Party supports the Charter For Women, developed by the National Assembly of Women in which Communists and allies play a prominent part. The charter is as follows:

- In society:
- ★ Highlight the feminisation of poverty and campaign to reverse cuts in welfare state and public services
  - ★ Expose the ideologies that are used to perpetuate women's inequality (for example, the notion of "family values" and the "family wage")
  - ★ Draw attention to the role of the media and other cultural agencies in shaping gender identities that reinforce the unequal relationships between men and women
  - ★ Campaign for greater support for lone mothers, carers and women fleeing domestic violence
  - ★ Improve access and rights to abortion
  - ★ Ensure that women and girls are entitled to the full range of free and high-quality educational provision (from nursery to university) and subject choice
  - ★ End women pensioner poverty by increasing the State pension in line with average earnings

- At work:
- ★ Campaign to end institutional and other forms of racism and ensure that the status and pay of black women workers is a bargaining priority
  - ★ Campaign to reduce the gender pay gap and highlight its causes
  - ★ End job segregation by improving training and opportunities for women
  - ★ Ensure that unions fight more equal value claims
  - ★ Campaign to change equal pay law to permit "class action" (group claims) and remove employer "get out" clauses
  - ★ Campaign to raise the level of national minimum wage to at least half — and rising to at least two-thirds — of male median earnings
  - ★ Demand statutory pay audits
  - ★ Equalise opportunities and improve conditions for women workers.=
  - ★ Demand full-time rights for part-time workers
  - ★ Root out bullying and sexual harassment
  - ★ End casualisation and especially zero-hours contracts.
  - ★ Reduce job segregation by providing training opportunities for women in non-traditional sectors
  - ★ Campaign for affordable child care including pre-school, after-school and holiday provision
  - ★ Campaign for a shorter working week for all
  - ★ Improve maternity leave and pay, including paid paternity leave
  - ★ Campaign for a change in the qualification criteria in the Industrial Injuries/Disability Benefit scheme, to end discrimination against women and in particular to extend the list of disorders in the prescribed disease schedules

- In the labour movement:
- ★ Tackle the under-representation of women in the labour and trade union movement structures by proportionality and other measures
  - ★ Ensure the accountability of women's structures to women
  - ★ Maintain and extend women's committees, women's courses and other measures to ensure that women's issues/concerns are collectively articulated and actioned
  - ★ Campaign to raise the profile of the TUC, STUC and



**Born to campaign**  
East End antifascist, tireless worker for the *Daily Worker* and *Morning Star*, Co-op activist, peace campaigner, Cuba partisan and pensioners' leader and an exemplary craftswoman – whose work with fabric and thread made her famous – Rita Weiss's autobiography, with additional material by her daughter



**Women and Class**  
A new and updated edition, for the first time in book form. Mary Davis sets out the basis of women's oppression, examines competing theories of feminism and argues for a materialist conception of sex and gender. This book is essential reading for activists in the women's and trade union movements. 80 pages. £4.50 [communistparty.org.uk](http://communistparty.org.uk)

## A working class programme for women

### Women

A pioneering project, initiated by communists in the East of England has resulted in a comprehensive analysis of the problems that affect the region and laid out a policies that enhance working class interests.

A key element of the *Eastern Rising* manifesto is a detailed and highly topical programme of policies that would advance the position of women and the whole of the working class.

**COMMUNIST WOMEN** presents an edited extract below.

*Across the region, women constitute a leading and vital role in the work, community and political life of the area. This is especially the case in sectors such as retail, scientific research, food processing, social care — residential and in the community — health, the hotel and catering sectors as well as throughout skilled sectors of science, manufacturing and education.*

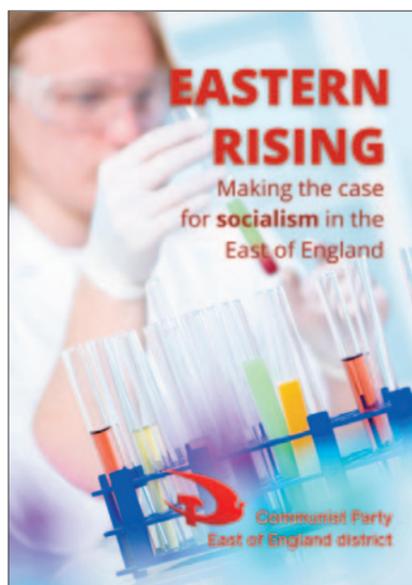
*But in all areas they are underrepresented, which means that councils and the labour movement are missing a huge opportunity to tap the talent and ingenuity of this section of our society. Women's role as representatives has stalled, with about only 30-35 per cent of councillors being female. Very few councils have in place a maternity-cover arrangement for elected reps or other systems of encouragement and support. Many meet at unsocial hours.*

*There are 3.1 million women in Eastern England. Some raise children full time, or have to juggle this role with work or study. Thousands work in food processing, in fields and factories. Our unions have failed to expunge the gangmasters' system, so this growing sector has a workforce that is ill-paid, ill-treated and unorganised.*

*Many are migrant workers and some work illegally. For these workers, the Communist Party has campaigned for unionisation, an end to precarious working and an amnesty where appropriate. Unions and councils could work with our education system to support these workers with language courses tailored to their*

*needs and built around their often complex working hours.*

*While the advance of women, their wellbeing and rights are too often blocked by the Conservatives, they also experience relegation to "minority" status on the political left, even though they are a majority in all the regions of Britain, including our own. This cannot be allowed to continue and the Communist Party in the Eastern district has taken a self-critical position on this question.*



*At 20 per cent of our membership overall, we know that far too few women are joining the Communist Party. So we have begun an internal process, led by female activists and local women leaders of the party to better understand how we can improve representation and membership at all levels.*

*At this time, while the government fights its culture wars, the rights of women have also come under attack.*

*In order to campaign for the Charter for Women (reproduced below) we as Marxists recognise the material reality of sex and that mental or spiritual processes arise only as the product of material conditions.*

*We therefore call for the protection of*

*women's spaces and protection of distinct services to protect women from violence and abuse.*

*The party's recent policy-making congress discussed the fact that women's rights, won over decades of struggle, were "under sustained ideological attack," thanks to the "growth and ascendancy of neoliberal philosophy across a range of intellectual fields".*

*While defending female rights we support human rights for all — including trans people. Members of the LGBT+ community and women are ill-served by measuring identity against stereotypical behaviours defined as boys' or girls' roles and behaviours.*

*We recognise the danger of using language that distorts material facts as this results in an inability to recognise that women's socialisation from birth — their education, pay, employment and health — are real issues that must be addressed, as well as deflecting focus from the effects of crime and violence resulting from misogyny and women's unequal status.*

*The facts on which we rely in order to campaign for women's rights should be based on sex and so statistics need to be recorded accurately, whether in census records, medical data, crime figures and all the other areas in which decisions are made.*

*The Communist Party has traditionally drawn its support and following from the trade union movement. It has always been closely associated — where it hasn't actually initiated — with many of the major advances for women. It campaigned for women to not only be allowed to join unions (yes, at one point some unions would not recruit them) but lead them.*

*In recent years, the party played a major role in initiating the Charter for Women supported by 27 national trade unions. It led the struggle for war-time crèches and in the '60s and '70s it led the campaign, through strike action and lobbying, to establish laws for equal pay and to advance reproductive rights. However, we still have a long way to go.*

*At 3.69 million members — well over half of all TUC affiliated trade unions — women are a powerful force bringing new ideas to our civic and labour movements.. ★*



# WOMEN'S ROLE

*If I have attained something in this world, it was not my personal qualities that originally brought this about. Rather my achievements are only a symbol of the fact that woman, after all, is already on the march to general recognition. It is the drawing of millions of women into productive work, which was swiftly effected especially during the war and which thrust into the realm of possibility the fact that a woman could be advanced to the highest political and diplomatic positions.* **Alexandra Kollontai**



▲ **RUSSIA 1917**

Striking women workers sparked the February Revolution on International Women's Day in 1917.

Bolshevik leaders wanted to wait until Workers' Day on May 1 to launch the revolution, but women took to the street to demand bread and an end to the war, and their protests forced the abdication of the czar.

Lenin declared Women's Day an official Soviet holiday after the October revolution, at the urging of his commissar of social welfare, Alexandra Kollontai

In 1910, when women in the Socialist International voted to make 8 March a day for women workers in all countries to demonstrate their solidarity, it seemed to us that we had no chance of achieving this in Russia. It was a time of vengeful triumphant reaction. Workers' organisations were smashed. Socialist leaders had fled abroad or were in jail. There was no focus around which to gather our forces, not a single socialist newspaper survived. 1909 and 1910 were joyless difficult years.

But the laws of historical development are more powerful than the bayonets of the Tsar's bloody satraps, and the intolerable lives of the exploited masses led to a rekindling of the strike movement. Workers faced the choice between suffering in silence, or entering the battle against the double tyranny of Tsarism and capital. The Russian proletariat bravely chose the latter course.

Gradually the fight gathered momentum. Throughout 1911 and 1912, Russia was swept with strikes. Some were economic, against layoffs and pay cuts. Others were of a political, anti-capitalist nature such as the mass May Day strikes in 1912, protesting against the shooting of 200 striking miners in Siberia.

The two social democratic parties in the capital began to put out the newspapers again, which continued to appear daily over the next two years, with readerships of over 50,000. New socialist publications developed their work, and the trade unions came back to life.

The workers' movement in Russia still faces innumerable obstacles. Strikers are punished with jail and exile, and police tyranny knows no bounds. Laws are made for the rich, not the workers! Added to which are the normal daily inconvenience of banned organisations - confiscated presses, constant fines and the need to keep changing the names of publications and moving premises. Landlords are arrested for renting accommodation to socialist organisations and finding rooms for meetings and offices is far from easy.

It's a struggle to the death. But fighters' courage has not deserted them, and women are joining the workers' movement in unprecedented numbers. They are no longer passionate young girls from wealthy families, sacrificing themselves as village teachers. We now see proletarian women fighting alongside men in trade unions and in all the organisations of the working class, and we read their appeals and letters in the socialist press.

Ever since the social democrats declared their support for our first International Women's Day in Russia, every political party, all sections of society have had their say. Some responded with ridicule and contempt. Others accused working women of joining forces with feminist organisations. So women decided that they must take matters into their own hands to make the day a major political event. They know they will face arrest and jail for this first attempt to voice their demands, but that others will be inspired by their courage and determination, and their sacrifices won't have been in vain.

On the agenda for the day are their demands for the vote and for state maternity protection. The latter is especially close to their hearts. Workers are arrested for demanding proper labour laws, and the socialist amendments to the Duma's Insurance Bill were passed only after angry demonstrations and battles with the police. Even in the Bill's revised version, the protection of working mothers and pregnant women is merely a supplementary clause, and its scope is extremely limited due to its last minute reworking. It is only working women themselves who will bring about the new laws they need as mothers and workers.

There are still those in Russia who object that Women's Day is a concession to the bourgeois women's organisations and threatens the unity of the workers' cause. Fortunately these objections are no longer heard abroad. Life itself has supplied the answers.

Women's Day is a link in the long chain of the proletarian women's movement in

Europe, which is growing stronger with every year that passes. Twenty years ago they were only a few women in the trade unions and scattered brightly here and there in socialist parties. Now there are over 500,000 women trade union members in England, Germany, France and Austria and 20,000 in the workers' parties. Working women are organising in Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Italy and Hungary. The socialist women's army is now almost a million strong - a mighty force!

And a force to be reckoned with when it comes to discussing the burning practical issues of maternity insurance, rising food prices, child labour and legislation to safeguard women's working conditions.

There was a time when working men thought they had to bear the burden of the struggle against capital on their own. But as increasing numbers of women enter the ranks of those who sell their labour - driven into the factories by need, or when a husband or father becomes unemployed - men see that leaving them behind damages the socialist cause and holds it back. The more class-conscious fighters there are the sooner we will be victorious. What consciousness can a woman have who stands at the stove, whose life is ordained by a husband or father, with no rights in her family or society and no ideas of her own? Women's "backwardness", their passivity and lack of rights, is of no benefit to the workers' movement and is indeed harmful to it. But how are they to be drawn into this movement?

Social democracy did not immediately find the correct answers to this question. The doors of the workers' organisations were open to women, but few joined. Why? Because the working class was at first slow to recognise their double oppression, as workers who sell the labour and as wives and mothers. They did not see that, as the most legally and socially deprived members of their class, exploited and intimidated over the centuries, they need a special approach to awaken their hearts and minds.

Working women in the different countries have done a huge amount to ensure that

men now understand the need for this work, and the workers' parties have been taking up the fight for women's interests, demanding their political rights and the proper protection of their labour. The more boldly socialists advance these demands, the more women will see us as their allies and the cause of women as a cause of the entire working class. The challenge facing the parties now is to attract more women as members.

Special committees have been set up to take this work forward, to campaign against rising prices, prostitution and infant mortality, and for new laws to protect pregnant women and nursing mothers. These committees draw women into the common struggle against war and exploitation, while at the same time encouraging them to raise their own specifically female demands.

The social democrats see these demands is fundamental to the entire workers' movement and they support Women's Day as a day for working women to stand up for their rights. And to those in Russia who still believe the "singling out" of women plays into the hands of the liberal feminists, we say they have completely failed to grasp the diametrically opposed class interests of the two movements.

Bourgeois women want the same privileges and advantages in capitalist society as are presently enjoyed by their husbands and fathers. The proletarian woman wants to abolish all privileges based on birth and class; for her it is a matter of indifference whether her employer is a man or a woman.

Bourgeois women demand equal political rights for women of their class, to allow them to make their way more successfully in a world based on the exploitation of others' labour. The proletarian woman demands political rights for all citizens, male and female, as a first step on the rocky path leading her to the kingdom of socialist labour.

The differences life has put before the mistresses and their servants have proved insurmountable. Working women have seen that the "better society" the feminist dream of has nothing to offer them, and the two movements have long gone their separate ways. Working men have nothing to fear from Women's Day, or from special women's committees, conferences and publications. All these draw women into the ranks of those fighting for a better future. And the slow patient work of building them, far from dividing workers serves to unite and strengthen the movement.

Proletarian women in Russia face a hard struggle, but they are inspired by the support of their sisters throughout the world. The day is fast approaching when workers of all countries will advance in closed ranks against the capitalists to end the slavery of wage labour. So let us celebrate Women's Day joyfully in Russia, fighting for our emancipation and for the emancipation of the entire working class, bringing the day closer to our goal - the inevitable, longed-for socialist revolution.

From *Writings from the Struggle* (Bookmarks 2020) selected and translated by Cathy Porter.

A lifelong socialist, Cathy Porter has published 28 books on Russia, including *Alexandra Kollontai: A Biography*, and *Writings from the Struggle*. *The Writings of Larisa Reisner*, and *Larisa Reisner. A Life* (Historical Materialism Books) are due for publication soon.