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Women Hold Up Half the Sky!

-On The Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day-

Statement of the Revolutionary Organization of Labor, USA
March 2011

The Revolutionary Organization of Labor, USA salutes the militant women all over the world who are actively engaged today in the struggle for social justice against international capitalism, headed by United States imperialism. These brave and often heroic women are fighting against the systematic ripping apart of their families through the compulsory migration of women workers from the oppressed nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America to the oppressor countries, including the USA, where they are often subjected to most brutal and humiliating treatment. They are struggling for national liberation against imperialist wars and brutal national oppression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Colombia, the Philippines, throughout the Indian subcontinent and many other countries. They are in the front ranks of the Arab masses today fighting for national sovereignty and democratic and labor rights and jobs in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East.



Working women are waging struggle here in the USA, too. Along with many Latina and Afro-American women struggling against super-exploitation and the casualization (“temps”) of their labor based on national oppression, militant women workers of all nationalities make up the majority of the public sector workers fighting today in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and elsewhere in defense of their union rights, including their right to have a collective voice in their workplaces. The “Republican” politicians, doing the bidding of Wall Street finance capital, would render these women workers isolated individuals up against the dictatorial non-union workplaces that are found in capitalist USA. U.S. imperialism strives to place them and their families at the mercy of the bosses.

The hostility of monopoly capitalism and imperialism to the needs of women is dramatically underscored by the following: Despite the fact that U.S. imperialism has been the hegemonic imperialist power in the world for the past sixty years, and, despite all the Democratic and Republican Party political rhetoric about “family values,” the USA is “decades behind other countries in ensuring the well-being of working families,” according to the women’s rights division of Human Rights Watch. In a just-released report, “Failing its Families,” Human Rights Watch observes that at least 178 countries have national laws guaranteeing paid leave to new mothers. The USA is one of a handful of exceptions, along with some of the poorest countries on earth. The U.S. labor movement has been so weak in defense of women’s rights that it trumpeted the passage of the 1993 Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) as a major peoples’ victory. FMLA, allows workers to take up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave for a new child or a seriously ill family member. But FMLA covers only about half the work force, and many covered workers cannot afford to take unpaid leave.

Working class and peasant women all across the globe are experiencing the pain and suffering of the acute world capitalist economic crisis and need each other’s solidarity and the solidarity of *all* the toiling masses in the struggle against international capitalism.

In this situation the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the first International Working Women’s Day in March 2011 is an occasion to look back and draw lessons from the past for the struggles ahead.

*** *The first international women’s day (IWD) came out of the mass movement of women.* In 1908, 15,000 working class women marched in New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay and voting rights. In 1909, the Socialist Party of America initiated the first National Woman’s Day.

*** *The initiative for the first IWD came from a proletarian revolutionary, Clara Zetkin, a leading German Communist who was in charge of her Party’s women’s work.* At an international women’s conference held in Denmark in 1910, she proposed that every year and in every country on the same day there should be a celebration of a women’s day to press their demands. The 100 women from 17 countries, representing unions, socialist parties, working women’s clubs and the first three women elected to the Finnish Parliament, unanimously approved the proposal.

*** *In March 1911, International Women’s Day was observed for the first time and promoted such broad democratic rights for women as the right to vote.* For women possessed this fundamental right in only a few countries in the world. IWD was observed in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland with more than one million women and men attending IWD rallies campaigning for women’s rights to work, vote, run for public office and to end discrimination. Less than a week later, in New York City, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire claimed the lives of 140 working women, most of them young Jewish and Italian immigrants. This tragic event helped to focus subsequent IWD events on working conditions, labor legislation and other working class women’s issues.

*** *In 1913, Russian women held their first observances of IWD, focusing on a campaign for peace on the eve of World War I.* In 1914, women across Europe held rallies to campaign against the war and express their international solidarity. The theme of opposing imperialist war has been one of the most important for IWD ever since.

*** *In 1917, on March 8, with 2 million Russian soldiers dead in World War I, Russian women rose up again for “bread and peace.”* Four days later the Czar was forced to abdicate; and the provisional government granted women the right to vote. Russia had been the most repressive regime in Europe. *Through revolution, the women of Russia won the right to vote* three years before the women of arguably the freest democratic republic on earth, the USA, won that right.

****In the many years since, International Women’s Day has been weakened by being co-opted by the powers that be and thus divorced from the class struggle.* The Charter of the United Nations (UNO) produced by the Soviet-led victorious peoples in the war against fascism in 1945 was the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right. Nevertheless, international women’s day has become weaker in the intervening years precisely because it became divorced from the struggle against international capital.

In the famous 1920 interview between V.I. Lenin, the outstanding leader of the Great October Socialist Revolution and then the head of the largest country on earth and the outstanding German Communist leader, Clara Zetkin, who had initiated the first International Women’s Day, Lenin placed great emphasis on “the unbreakable connection between woman’s human and social position and the private ownership of the means of production.” He added, “This will draw a strong, ineradicable line against the bourgeois movement for the ‘emancipation of women.’ This will also give us a basis for examining the woman question as part of the social, working class question, and to bind it firmly with the proletarian class struggle and the revolution. The communist women’s movement itself must be a mass movement, a part of the general mass movements; and not only of the proletarians, but of all the exploited and oppressed, of all victims of capitalism or of the dominant class.”

Even in the context of U.S. imperialist domination of the world capitalist economy over these decades, the working people of the USA have still been able to produce a few of the outstanding women fighters for justice who have become symbols of the struggle for the emancipation of women on a *global* scale. Fanny Lou Hamer in Mississippi in the 1960’s rising Afro-American national liberation movement, Crystal Lee Sutton (the real “Norma Rae”) in North Carolina in the 1970’s in an otherwise largely dormant organized labor movement, and Cindy Sheehan, as the consistent internationalist conscience of the inconsistent U.S. anti-war movement in the 2000’s, did *not* focus narrowly on the rights of women. Their focus was more generous and more collective. Through the collective struggle against imperialist exploitation and oppression: against the oppression of the Afro-American people, the exploitation of the working class, and the mobilization of U.S. working class youth for imperialist war and oppression of the peoples of other lands, respectively, each of these wonderful women came into her own as a fighter for herself, for all women and for all humanity.

Inspired by such heroic women as Clara Zetkin, Fanny Lou Hamer, Crystal Lee Sutton and Cindy Sheehan, let us wage the struggle for women’s rights today in the fight for national liberation, workers’ power and socialism.

We are pleased to announce the formation last fall of the International Coordination of Revolutionary Parties and Organizations (ICOR) consisting of approximately 30 organizations from around the world. Its positive aim is coordinated international revolutionary activity, such as events around this 100th Anniversary of International Working Women’s Day. Thus the series of events celebrating International Women’s Day that Revolutionary Organization of Labor, USA has initiated and/or participated in are carried out in the spirit of proletarian international solidarity.

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