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# Feminism and the Working Class

Madeleine Pelletier

July 1912

The working-class will be last to come round to feminism. It is natural: ignorant people only respect brute force and it is a waste of time to try to interest them by showing them female genius crushes by man's rule.

If I am a Socialist, it is because I passionately love justice. I cannot stand that, as soon as they are born, we draw distinctions between individuals, raising one to lead, and the other to obey. I am in favour of everything: enlightenment, power, well-being being accessible to everyone and of the most worthy being given the highest rank.

But liking the working class as it currently is, no! A thousand times no!

I declare these principles to the readers of "La Suffragiste" because I have just read an article by Pouget<sup>1</sup> which I am sure will they won't like any more than I did. Comrade Pouget, one of the leaders of the CGT, writes about the milliners' union which was just created. Naturally, he happy about this union victory, but he fears for the future. Female unions, he observes, do not last, they are a short-lived flash in the pan. They are

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formed around some industrial event or other: a strike, some obviously unfair treatment which managed at some point to raise some indignation. Then, straightaway, they fall. At first, it is the main part of the troops which stops showing up, then it is the militants themselves, discouraged by the absence of members.

Why is that? Pouget observes: it is because of housework. Once the working day over, the male worker is free, while the female worker is not: she must on top of everything do her housework, and therefore she has no time to attend union meetings. However, Mr. Pouget would like her to attend union meetings. It is through unions that male workers have gained wages which, although low, allow them to live. If female workers do not earn enough to live independently, it is because they are not organised. So what can we do?

I assure you I would have found the answer straightaway. I would have told male workers: my dear comrades, when you are alone to work to fund your household, it is fair that your wife who does not work takes care of the housework. But when she works all day just like you do, it is your strict duty to help her. She is not your servant, but your equal, just like you, she needs to inform herself, get to know the causes of her poverty, learn to organise to defend herself against the ruling class. She must therefore have time to do so, and therefore you need to do your share of household chores.

That is how I would have solved the problem, and I assure you I take no glory in such a discovery: to reach it, no need for a transcendental intellect, a simple sense of justice is enough.

However, such a simple solution is not mentioned by Mr. Pouget. You don't say, tell male workers to help their wives with housework, but that would be a crime of *lèse-masculinité*! And for women to be able to attend union meetings, he demands, guess what... the five-and-a-half-day week. I am not against this reform, mind you. And day and a half of rest a week, Saturday afternoons and Sundays off, is not too much

for people who work 10 or even 12 hours a day. But waiting for this fair reform to be granted, Mr. Pouget should have given male workers the advice I indirectly give them.

On top of this, a reduced working week would not be enough to get the result for which Mr. Pouget wishes that is, female union attendance. In half a day, you can wash your floor, do the dishes, clean, you still have the mending of socks, cooking which needs to be done every day; female workers would benefit from the extra half a day, but it won't give them enough free time to become militants.

My advice, if it was put into effect, would allow them to become militants, since on top of the material reduction of work, women would understand that they are also human beings and social individuals. If they saw their husbands do their share of housework, they would see him no longer as a master, but as an equal. They would then, understanding that they are sincerely invited, do the work of militants of their class. Then, female unions would bloom and we would see, among the mass of female workers, energetic militants appear who would be able to rouse their comrades.

The male worker who denounces injustice within society wants to keep acting unjustly within his own family. Slave to his boss, he wishes to be a master to his wife. Fortunately, the fairness of things punishes him. Women, in their ignorance, soon desert the union which they joined with enthusiasm the day before. And, workers or housewives, they remain, although their hostility is unvoiced, the worst adversaries of the workers' movement. They are the real strike-breakers. They do more with discouraging words to their husband on strike than socially reactionary ministers can do with the guns of their regiments.

It is only fair, the proletariat only gets the women it deserves.