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What Does the Syndicalist Women's Union Want?

Milly Witkop-Rocker

1922

By syndicalism, we mean the economic union of manual and intellectual workers on the basis of a federal form of organization that is oriented both to practical everyday demands and to the achievement of a better future.

With the strength of their economic and moral solidarity, syndicalist workers try to better their overall situation within today's society in all directions, using all the means of direct-action struggle that the moment commands.

The principal aim of the syndicalists, however, is to overcome the capitalist state and economic order and reorganize society on the basis of libertarian socialism. — The syndicalists believe that the land, the instruments of production, and the products of labor belong to the whole, and must be managed by the producers themselves. For this reason, the preparation of the worker for this purpose appears to them as the most crucial task of socialist education.

Unlike the so-called socialist workers' parties of various tendencies, which stipulate that the conquest of political power is the goal, the syndicalists reject every form of the State and its

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various institutions, since they argue that the State was never and never can be anything other than the political apparatus of force of the propertied classes to ensure the economic exploitation of the broad masses of the working people.

Likewise, the syndicalists are principled opponents of every Church, in which they only see an institution for the mental domination and damnation of the working people, cultivating willing objects of exploitation for the bosses and loyal subjects for the State.

The syndicalists fight against every form of militarism, which they see as a terrible threat to the physical and mental well-being of the people, which is in reality only a weapon in the hands of the ruling classes to protect the power of the propertied classes against the working class, harnessing power of the great majority of the people against the rebellion of the oppressed. For the workers of all lands, there is no benefit to be had from slaughtering one another, and it is only their ignorance which arranges for them to go to the wars which are the result of conflicts of interests between the capitalists of different States. The syndicalists are opponents of the national lie; behind its dazzling raiment there is always hidden the naked egoism of the possessing classes. By principle, recognize the right of free development for every nation and for each group in the nation, as long as they are not passed to the welfare of all the damage that they are internationalists and representative of a general brotherhood of peoples.

The syndicalists fight against the educational system sanctioned by State or Church, the only purpose of which is ultimately to reduce the minds of the young to stencils and to mold them into certain forms so that later, they can more willingly serve the system of political oppression and economic exploitation of the broad masses by a small privileged minority. We believe that the organized working class must provide the school for their own children on their own initiative, and we support any attempt aimed at wresting the monopoly of educa-

in which the exploitation and domination of the broad masses by privileged minorities will be a thing of the past.

Let no one tell you that you are not capable of contributing to this grandiose work. Each of you, but also everyone, without exception, can contribute their mite to the common goal. We only have to want it. Let us want it, then, so that our children will not to throw the accusation in our faces that we live as slaves and brought them into the world as slaves, so that they too can wander through life laden with the curse of bondage.

Let us show them that we did not willingly bear the yoke that was imposed on us, and that we rebelled against the violence done to us so that the gates of freedom may be opened for them.

tioned at this point. In all these connections and groupings, our main concern is to bring the women closer to one another, thus creating a more intimate and lasting companionship between them.

Hand in hand with these experiments of a practical nature, our educational work must then go on to develop existing talents and abilities, and to promote and develop the spirit of independence and personal initiative among women to the best of their ability. A certain template cannot be set up in all these things. Here the special local conditions and the disposition of the individual must decide. Of course, an exchange of experiences made in different areas is of the utmost importance, so that they can be fruitfully used in the interest of the whole.

Let us never forget that we live in a most bitter period, which at the same time can only be counted as a transitional period. The time of indifference and apathy is over and may not come again. We have entered a period of intense activity that finds its root in the revolutionary situation of our time.

Let us not fail to take advantage of the present opportunity, and let us become familiar with the thought that we may yet be destined to bury this old society, whose history was written with the blood and tears of the wretched poor, to build over its ruins a world of freedom on the unshakable foundations of communal labor and mutual solidarity.

In this sense, it is important to strive and make propaganda in order to forge a better future. Let us show that we are not only willing to feed on the harvests of the past, but that we also feel the courage and the excitement in ourselves to lend a hand, to push the wheel of time forward and to open the gates to a new becoming.

Well then, sisters, young or old, girls and women, manual or intellectual laborers, come to us and join our covenant, so that the great work of social liberation may reach its consummation. Unite with us to foster a brighter future for us and our children,

tion from the State and the Church. Only in this way will it be possible to set up a truly free education for life, which not only opens up the collective treasures of human knowledge and provides them to the children, but also at the same time stirs them to their own meditations, promoting their independence and the development of their character in all directions.

It is the job of the Syndicalist Women's Union to make these aspirations known to women and especially to work in the circles of those women who are not directly employed in industry. The woman should not only be married to the man, but fight beside him as a comrade [*auch Mitkämpferin und Gesinnungsgenossin werden*], since she is subject to exactly the same undignified living conditions as he. It should not be forgotten that the woman cannot be underestimated in the economic struggle, especially as far as battles are concerned in those industries whose activities are oriented to the needs of the masses. While the man represents his interests as a producer in enterprises and factories, defending these interests, if needed, with the weapon of the strike, the woman can support him effectively by helping him as a consumer with the weapon of the boycott in his struggles, which also hers. In any case, the strike is proving more and more to be an insufficient means which must be supplemented by other means in order to continue to be the workers' most effective weapon, and the whole economic development of our time presses forcefully for a closer union between producers and consumers, in which women are called to play a major role. As soon as women have their say in this area too, many things may well be quite different.

We maintain that not only can big improvements in material living conditions be achieved by women's action in their own country, but that the beneficial effect of these struggles should be perceived also by the working class of other countries to which we have become an economic scourge by virtue of our inflation.

If the workers would, for instance, refuse to move products to foreign countries which are used in their own country and are sold at outrageous prices as a result of shifting policies, and if women in turn support such a movement by an organized consumer boycott, we would probably very quickly see some changes in today's unbearable situation.

The current situation calls for very different methods in the practice of everyday struggle, and the struggle against intolerable, extortionate prices will probably play a bigger role in the future than the continual increase in wages, which usually becomes an illusion once again the very next day due to new price increases.

- Here, an active intervention is crucial, and it is precisely in this area that women could find a grateful field for their work in the service of the people's common interests.
- The ignorance and stupidity that still keeps the mentality of the masses in fetters led them, during the time of inopportune war, to accept the most terrible privations; it is high time that this spirit of self-sacrifice discovered the cause of its own liberation.

In order for this spirit to take root among the people, so that humanity can finally be released from its millennial slavery, the syndicalist women's federations must also contribute to this.

A lot has been said and even more written about the emancipation of women. It has been the question of each side examined and ventilated and has reached all possible and impossible circuits. Not only the doctor, the physiologist and the sociologist have dealt with this problem: the arts and literature has taken possession of it, and one can say that it has found a wide space right here.

The great intellectual movement in Europe, which began with the period of the Great French Revolution, but especially

question in its ultimate consequences, they will themselves become responsible for all the inevitable consequences of the evil that will overtake us. The organization of women on the basis of anarcho-syndicalism is as necessary as the organization of male workers on the same basis. That's why we have to support each other and go hand in hand in our work.

Wherever there is a syndicalist organization, an attempt must be made to create one of the women, so that the sections of the syndicalist women's federation will cover the whole country like a net. The Women's Federation [*Föderation der Frauen*], founded in October 1921 at the first syndicalist women's conference in Düsseldorf, needs to be expanded everywhere, so that in the near future we will have a healthy and combative movement of men and women who will complement each other in their work, for the benefit and prosperity of our common cause.

In order for us to achieve our goal as quickly as possible, along with our aspirations to win woman to our ideal and to train her as a fighter in the great struggle of our time, we must try to find ways and means adequate to the special character of our task. The closest thing would be to put the proposals that were being debated at the Düsseldorf Conference into action as soon as possible.

Wherever possible, we should call small women's clubs into being, pleasantly and tastefully furnished and equipped with libraries, where the comrades can meet anytime to read or to speak on important issues, and where they can bring their children, if necessary. Common work rooms are also an excellent means for this purpose.

One would have to try to promote efforts of mutual aid in cases of illness, etc. to the best of their ability to connect the individual woman more firmly with her new circle through friendship ties. Similarly, groups may be considered for the promotion of artistic or similar endeavors. Also, the housing complex with a central kitchen [*Einküchenhaus*] should be men-

the working class, has been strengthened anew by women's suffrage.

All the bitter experiences and disappointments of the past will have to be made again, until finally the female half of the people has convinced itself of the uselessness and harmfulness of parliamentarism for the cause of proletarian liberation. And it is precisely for this reason that our work is of double and triple importance.

The woman who has been ignored for so long has suddenly become a much sought-after person. All parties are making tremendous efforts to win woman's favor, and every means is good enough for them to achieve this purpose.

Thus it is distracted from its real purpose and directed into the murky waters of politics, which ultimately has only to benefit the state, the church, and capitalism. The bearers of the reaction will make use of women's ignorance; they will constantly strive to exploit the material misery of the proletariat, which is palpable to woman to the highest degree, for their shady plans to exploit political capital. Thus, the political indifference of women will become a powerful factor of the nearest future, which will give all reactionary measures of parliament the sanction of the "popular will."

And from the other side, the crude and proletarian illusion of parliamentarism as a means of freeing the working class will continue to exert its disastrous influence on the masses.

Have our male co-thinkers seriously considered this question? Have they recognized their ominous consequences and clearly grasped their inevitable consequences? It seems to me that this is not the case, for if the great majority of our comrades had really understood the seriousness of the present situation, the three-year work of the Syndicalist Women's Association would have been far more successful than it really was.

I do not want to cast blame on anyone here, because the time is far too serious for us to attack one another, but one thing must be said: as long as our comrades do not try to grasp this

with the massive upheaval of our entire economic life in the beginning of the last century, moved the problem of women's emancipation in the forefront of our considerations, but few bold thinkers found the moral courage to draw the ultimate consequences of their acquired knowledge.

And these few brave men and women had the whole retinue of philistines against him, who felt threatened by the bold approach of the new "world-wreckers [*Weltumstürzler*]" whose destructive criticism even did not stop before the sanctity of the family.

Ibsen and others had loudly and fearlessly proclaimed that the liberation of women in the family was bound to fail if men did not thoroughly correct their previous attitude towards women. For the philistines and blockheads, however, this constituted a monstrous crime, to which, in their petty meanness, they attributed the most ignoble motives.

And, nevertheless, these "evildoers" were led by the deepest feelings of ethics and humanity when they prepared to tear the hypocritical mask from the face of the institution of the family, canonized by Church and State, to expose it to the world in its true form.

Until his death, Ibsen lashed out at the existing family and tried to convince us that without women's intellectual liberation, a true co-existence between man and woman is unthinkable, that the women's emancipation is an issue not only for women, but also for the world, for children, for men, for all humanity, and that the resolution of this question could no longer be avoided.

How is it that, up to now, the great significance of this question has been least recognized by the majority of women, who should have had the most interest in it? This strange phenomenon has already drawn the attention of many, but in spite of all efforts, only a few have come to understand the reasons why.

Some assert that woman cannot be free as long as she is connected with the family; others do not go so far back, but seek the reason for this indifference in women's kitchen slavery. They think that binding women within the narrow circle of housekeeping leaves them with no particular interest in other questions.

These are the bitter experiences of women who were active for many years as champions of women's emancipation and repeatedly encountered the same difficulties in a life rich in struggles.

There is now no doubt that by far the hardest part of family burdens weighs upon the woman, and that the kitchen is not an institution that offers great opportunities for intellectual development. But we have to take things as they are, and we must already accept the need to seek out women in their hiding places, bringing the necessary enlightenment to them there.

This work needs to be done and should be our most sacred task. Certainly, the task is not easy and pleasant, but it must be embraced and pursued all the more energetically in so far as we have come to the conclusion that the need to win woman for our cause outweighs any concerns.

In order for the issue of her liberation to interest woman, to make her feel the need for her mental development, we must first try to understand the cause of her backwardness. Experience has shown us that the most beautiful and most ardent appeals have been made to feel the woman to no great result. We must therefore try to see if there are no other ways to approach women's understanding.

"Yes, if woman would only think," a good comrade once told me, "but she thinks too little and maybe not at all." — Well, I think that woman thinks too much, way too much, but that her whole thinking continues to be turned toward the most trivial little things, so that her brain is consumed with and exhausted by them.

encing a renaissance, cannot be dreamed of a renaissance of humanity.

A question of momentous significance has hitherto been almost entirely disregarded, or it has at least not found the attention that it deserves, no doubt. Before the war, the woman was only a passive element in public life. In this respect alone there has been a big change. Not only did she play a tremendous role during the war, when she herself intervened in those fields of industrial and professional activity that were previously the undisputed domain of man, a phenomenon that was not salvaged either by her or by humanity in general — she has since become a factor in politics not to be underestimated.

The revolutions in Russia and Central Europe, the inevitable results of the great genocide, also brought so-called suffrage women, which had long been the ideal of the bourgeois and social-democratic women's movements. It has often been asserted that woman was given the right to vote in view of her great achievements during the war. Whatever the case may be, it does not dispel the fact that this move has bolstered the reaction and will do so more in the future.

The right to vote has by no means been forged by women in the revolution and its achievements, as so often claimed by socialist politicians; on the contrary, it has led them into a new world of deception which must alienate them from any defensively revolutionary view of things.

Not only will she, who has hitherto had little or nothing to do with public affairs, only benefit the cause of the reaction in the end by her ignorance and miseducation (see, for example, the various election results here in Germany), but it is clear that she has become a new and formidable obstacle to the development of the workers' movement, especially here in Germany.

The old deluded faith in the parliamentary activity as the road to redemption, which has so long doomed the German working class, and which, after long and painful experiences, finally began to lose its old halo among the broad circles of

bring women into the union, and not only as producers; it is also the power of women as consumers that needs to be activated, and this can only be done by joining forces in the organization. This is the most important and noble task of the Syndicalist Women's Association.

It is the women of the house and the family organization to identify and promote their intellectual development in any way for them to finally realize their subhuman situation. and come to the consciousness of itself. The work that has been done during the three years of its existence, our organization, we are entitled to hope that we are well able to be our major task, if we approach with all our energy to them, to gain their breakthrough.

Certainly, the difficulties and obstacles that await us are not small, but they are not insuperable, and they can probably be overcome with patience, tenacity, and strong will. We must never forget that woman was ignored, seen and treated as intellectually inferior, for so long that we can hardly expect the sudden and surprising success of our activities for the time being.

The inevitable consequences of a thousand years of slavery cannot be undone at once. Its repercussions are sure to be felt for a long time, felt at any rate more than we should like. Those who expect something different in this regard have failed to grasp the enormity of the problem; the great tragedy of woman has slipped past them without a trace.

Although we, by no means should evaluate the small obstacles that our work will be to brace against, so still has the importance and the iron necessity of the thing itself is always at the center of our work. The woman is now primarily the educator of youth, in its capacity as parent unmistakably has the greatest influence on the child.

Here we touch one of the biggest problems of our time that must be solved at any cost, if at all yet to be spoken of a further development of our race. As long as the woman is not experi-

Her entire life is filled with a plethora of banal things, but hardly ever to deal with the issues of the day. Since the entire management of the household almost exclusively weighs upon her, and her funds are meted extremely scarcely in most cases — I am speaking of course of the women of the working class — so she is always forced to speculate on every last penny.

Under these circumstances, is it all too understandable that she is left with little time to focus her mind on other things, so that many women feel no desire at all for intellectual development.

We know, for example, that the so-called division of labor in modern large-scale industry has a very fatal influence on the worker's mind and degrades him more and more to the state of an automaton. In the proletarian housewife we notice a similar phenomenon, but arising from a completely opposite cause. She is used as a machine due to her versatility.

In her case, however, it is not a versatility that can have a stimulating effect on the mind, but a versatility that is composed of nothing but the trivialities that unfortunately cannot be avoided in today's form of proletarian home economics. As long as no change can be made here, our efforts to raise women's consciousness will only ever achieve modest results.

We have long understood that if the worker is chained to his work for ten, twelve, or fourteen hours, he cannot possibly muster the energy necessary for his intellectual development. It is for this reason that the reduction of working hours has played such a prominent role in the modern labor movement, and I would argue that in addition to fighting for the recognition of the worker's human dignity, the reduction of working hours has been the most important result of the international workers' movement to this day.

But who ever thought to limit the working hours of women in the household, so that they too would be able to be able to act on their intellectual training? Yet there must also be a change in this area, because it is unacceptable that half of humanity is

to stay indefinitely prevented from adding to any intellectual development.

In other countries, however, such as America, where women make much higher demands of life than here in Germany, significant reforms in housekeeping have long been achieved and are still taking place which have facilitated the work of the housewife in every way.

I need only recall the introduction, on the broadest basis, of central heating, washing machines and electric drying apparatus, vacuums, indoor baths, etc., all things that have already been made to serve large parts of the proletarian population in America, which make all the more embarrassing, for those who know it, the extremely primitive state of proletarian housekeeping in Germany.

On the other side of the pond, it has been seen that technical improvements are no less important and necessary in housekeeping than in the factory and workshop. What still appears as a utopia to the proletarian woman in Germany has already become a reality for many of their class comrades in America.

Fifty years ago, it was utopian to dream of an eight-hour working day, as it is still a utopia to dream of a limitation of working hours in proletarian housekeeping. But utopias are invented to be realized, and as long as there is no demand for an improvement of living conditions, changing things is impossible.

Closely connected with the question because of the proletarian woman's dispensation to housekeeping is another matter of even greater importance. We now speak of the blessing of children without end, which is particularly found among the proletarian families of Germany, and which transforms woman into a lifelong slave. Reforms in housekeeping, as we have previously indicated, cannot be made all of a sudden.

One can strive for them and stress their necessity to women. But in the area of an unlimited increase in the population, an immediate intervention is possible and feasible. It is truly al-

not merely reproach her, but also encourage and rouse her to action. We should support woman both mentally and morally, pointing her the way to freedom, which she must naturally find for herself.

But how should we first approach woman, especially in the house and in the family, to rouse her? This difficult problem we must try to solve. It is hard to approach the women who are employed in industry.

Those of us who have worked in this field know what an immense effort of perseverance and patience were needed to make clear the need for organization to the women in the factories and workshops. Why it has been and partly is still so very difficult to reach women in industry, who were still worse situated, in many respects even more enslaved than the woman in the house, can only be explained by the fact that they regarded their work in the factory as a temporary stage of their lives.

The proletarian woman was of the opinion that once she found a man, the social question was solved for her, and as a result, she did not very much understand the organizational efforts.

We can understand this, even though the calculation was entirely wrong, because experience has taught us nowadays, it is only in very rare cases that marriage is capable of solving women's economic problems. The married proletarian woman today is in most cases forced to return to her old job to work under increasingly worse conditions.

Only over the years did women begin to better understand their situation and slowly join their industrial organization. But they usually remain only until they find a man in the organization and marry. We have no choice but to visit our sister, the woman situated in the family, in her home, to introduce her to our ideas and aspirations, and to convince her of the need for an organizational union.

We must always keep this task before our eyes, for it is the most important step in our propagandistic activity. We must

ideal, became one of its mightiest pillars and has remained so to this day.

So we see that the claim that women cannot be won over to a great movement like socialism is just as groundless as the assertion that the proletariat generally has no sympathy for socialism.

The proletariat has been kept in ignorance and slavery by the propertied classes for centuries, so that they have had little time for intellectual training, particularly for their own thinking, people who, though physically tough, are above all very often loaded malnourished and with all sorts of worries, have little opportunity to think seriously about social problems.

In most cases it is not innate stupidity and inertia of thought that makes workers dull and indifferent, as is so often claimed, but the lack of the necessary opportunity and leisure. And what is true here of the male proletariat is much more so for proletarian women. The eternal reproaches that are hurled at women every day about their ignorance and indifference are thus hardly the way to lead them onto other paths. We have already realized today that the dreary bullying to which stupid pedagogues subject young people usually achieves just the opposite of what it should.

By trampling on the human dignity of youth in this way, they have greatly harmed them spiritually and mentally, placing obstacles to their natural development. We believe that such a method must be rejected in every way, that one should not always emphasize people's weaker side, but must appeal more to the good, the noble and the purely human, strengthening their will and reviving their courage. But such a procedure is even more necessary for woman, who has already been intimidated anyway, whose self-confidence has been severely shaken by her long slavery.

The proletarian woman hardly suspects that even within herself, hidden talents and abilities lie dormant, only to be awakened and quickened in serving the cause of humanity. We must

ready high time that woman should stop playing the role of a mere breeding machine, the accidental victim of a multiplication of her family.

A child should only see the light of day if it is wanted by the parents and it can be provided with the material conditions for healthy and humane development. As things stand today, however, the birth of every new child in a proletarian's family means a greater austerity in the most necessary necessities of life and very often the destitution and slow languishing of all family members.

Since increase in family size is not automatically connected to an increase in the proletarian income, every bite, which must be given to the new and in most cases unwelcome guest, will be deducted from the lives of the rest of the family. That such a state of affairs is very desirable for the propertied classes is easily understood.

The more the proletarians' strength is exhausted and depleted in the daily struggle for existence, the less they are tempted to express outrage against the yoke that has been imposed on them, and the more they are forced to dully endure their misery. Big proletarian families mean cheap material for the entrepreneur to exploit and less risk in the inevitable economic battles between labor and management — and the State welcomes cannon fodder in case of a war.

But the proletarian woman has her fertility for a twofold fatality. Not only does her concern for her daily bread continue to make the family existence ever more difficult, but she herself is a victim of physical exhaustion, and all kinds of illnesses that drain her life, so that she withers prematurely.

That a woman whose life is only moving from one pregnancy to the next, is lost for any mental development, is all too understandable. And unfortunately there are millions of proletarian women in this terrible situation.

– It is therefore one of the main tasks of the Syndicalist Women's Union, in this regard, to spread the necessary aware-

ness among women and stand with them to remove one of the most difficult obstacles to their liberation. Those who frown upon such enlightenment for so-called “aesthetic” reasons, are borderline reactionaries who have not grasped all the gruesomeness of proletarian misery.

This is not the place to dwell on the origin and nature of the family, although it should not be forgotten that it is all too often behind its narrow walls that the most terrible tragedies are staged, equally appalling for all parts – husband, wife, and children. But a large part of all that is ugly and petty in so many families, which plays such a prominent and inglorious role today, may disappear when woman reaches a higher level of intellectual development.

The family is no artificial creation, arbitrarily called into being and always wearing the same forms. It has assumed different forms in different times and places, and also its present form will not remain the same; they will continue to evolve and adopt new forms, keeping pace with economic and social changes and with the ethical and intellectual needs of the people.

To this day, it has been the most significant and influential institution for the individual lives of human beings, and it will undoubtedly remain for a long time. It is probably within the circle of the family, especially in youth, that people receive the deepest impressions, impressions that very often give their later lives a decisive direction. It should therefore be done everything possible to give this narrow circle a character that is as pleasant as possible and mentally appealing, especially one in which the child can experience well-being.

From their parents’ home, young people ought to take the richest and most beautiful memories with them on the path of life, which should accompany them later in all struggles and perils like a warm ray of hope. So ought it to be, so must it be, so shall it be when men and women come together as free

and equal people, dedicating themselves to one another in the spirit of real love and mutual respect.

But such a state of coexistence is only possible if both sexes are equal in all their relations and woman is no longer regarded as an immature and inferior being. We demand not women’s rights but human rights, and we want to win them in all spheres of life.

There was only one period in history in which women were addressed among the people. This happened in the time of the early Christian movement. The words that were spoken to her then deeply penetrated into woman’s soul, arousing what was most beautiful and precious in her. All the hidden feelings and sensations that had lain dormant in her for millennia suddenly came to the fore and found a wonderful expression in it. With a holy earnestness, she answered its call, proving that the slavery of centuries had not broken her spirit.

Such a call is again needed from us today to seize woman’s heart with tongues of fire and to lead her into our ranks as a fighter. Early Christianity was able to release her soul by appealing to her humanity and presenting her as an equal at the side of men. And later, when Christian doctrine strangled in Church dogma and woman was branded as the mother of Original Sin, women fought for their human rights for many years to come.

She took a prominent part in all movements against the Church and died as a heretic and witch on the countless pyres of the Inquisition after having endured all the agonies of the torture chamber. Only when all of these movements had bled to death and the Church remained as the victor on the battlefield did woman succumb to its enticements. In the mystical semi-darkness of the old Dome, her soul was weak and brittle.

A weary resignation had taken hold of her, and she became the servant of the Church, which was most glad of this victory, for woman, who in her hopelessness was seized by its deceitful