

# For Women--and Revolution!

by Barbara Rogers

**I**nternational Women's Day was formalised as an annual event by the United Nations General Assembly, which fixed 8th March as the date during its 1977 session. Since then the idea has been taken up by women's organisations, trade unions and local authorities in Britain as an event around which women's activities can focus. It can easily go beyond the idea of a single day, and sometimes lasts for a week or even a fortnight.

The idea of an annual day for women has been around long before 1977. International Women's Day has had its moments of glory both in support of women's rights and in the peace movement. The most dramatic was a 1917 Women's Day march in Petersburg which sparked the revolution overthrowing the Russian Empire's semi-feudal and autocratic monarchy.

In Britain as in many other countries, International Women's Day was long associated with the trade unions and the left in general - and it in fact originates in trade union organising by working women, especially those in the sweatshops of the clothing industry, who were doing extremely long

hours in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. March 8th was proposed as the landmark when a march was held in New York on that day in 1908 to commemorate the struggle for improved conditions by a group of clothing workers - and their hunger march the previous year calling for better wages and a ten-hour day, which had been attacked by the city police.

Two years later the Second Socialist Women's International Conference, held in Copenhagen with delegates from 17 countries, adopted a resolution calling for "an annual Women's Day - a unified international demonstration" to be celebrated by women all over the world in the movement for women's rights, peace and freedom. This was celebrated for the first time in 1911 in Germany, Denmark, Switzerland and Austria - with another in the US a month earlier. Rallies and demonstrations involving an estimated one million women and men demanded the right to vote and to hold public office, and an end to sex discrimination in employment and training.

Two years later, with more countries joining in the event, the first

Women's Day rally was held in Russia's main industrial city, Petersburg. The marchers, also comprising mainly women from the clothing industry, faced severe police brutality. The event established International Women's Day as the Russian "working women's day of militancy" and the event has become a standard part of the Soviet Union's official secular calendar - although now sentimentalised into a kind of Soviet Mother's Day complete with sappy cards, bunches of flowers (at inflated freemarket prices) and a couple of hours off for all women on that day. A few hours to compensate for a double or triple shift and the ravages of a long, cold winter. Big deal.

As the First World War loomed in 1914 International Women's Day became an anti-war event. Peace became a major theme of the day in the US for the duration of the war. Meanwhile back in Petrograd, on 23 February (the equivalent of 8th March in the old Julian calendar, later abandoned for the western or Georgian one) it was the large demonstration celebrating Women's Day that led to a riot - and to the February Revolution which estab-



Trade Union Congress



lished the Provisional Government under Kerensky. This lasted only a few months, trying to continue fighting the war against the Germans against all odds, until the Bolshevik coup d'etat in October.

In Britain it was only in 1926 - the year of the General Strike - that International Women's Day was taken up. This was done by an interesting alliance of the (then) very important Co-operative Women's Guild and the Communist Party. From then on until the end of the Second World War, 8th March was a regular event for expressing opposition to fascism in Britain and Europe.

Perhaps because of this anti-fascist (and left-wing) association, the event was dropped at the end of the war in Britain and many other countries. It was revived in the late 1960s by the new women's liberation movement. In 1971 a demonstration of 5,000 women in London demanded equal pay, equal opportunity, free 24-hour childcare, free contraception and abortion on demand. The event has grown since then in a completely unstructured kind of way - there is no coordinating body, for instance - because it provides a convenient date around which women can organise if we want to. This is why some parts of the country have well-organised and very lively events, while others may not have anything. Most trade unions organise something, and the Women's Trade Union Congress takes place around this time. Local authorities are the other source of events.

International Women's Day has taken its place, along with Feminist Book Fortnight in June, as one of the two key dates for women's events. It is Women's Day which offers perhaps the widest range of activities, and the possibility of reflecting on the original - and not yet achieved - goals of the women who started it all: women's rights, and peace and freedom for all.

*Source: Everywoman*

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## Women in Development

### Europe Working Group prepares for 1995 UN Conference on Women

**P**reparations are now beginning for a UN conference on women to be held in 1995. Women in Development Europe (WIDE) has decided to begin preparing for this event by assessing the achievements/failures of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies. WIDE is also planning to be involved in the early discussions about the agenda of the Conference by applying for official UN observer status.

Pauline Eccles, Mieke van der Veken and Anna Foca will make up the core working group which will prepare a discussion paper assessing the Forward Looking Strategies (FLS) for broader discussion among WIDE network.

At present the group is collecting information and responding to a paper sent to the group by Erika Maerke on the FLS.

#### Possible themes

The UN division for the Advancement of Women in Vienna reports that the priority themes for the meeting are: equality, increased awareness by women of their rights including legal literacy, equal pay for equal value, equality in economic decision-making, elimination of stereotyping of women, development, women in extreme poverty, integration of women's concerns in national development

planning, women in urban areas, population, and nutrition, health factors, migration, drug consumption and AIDS, peace, women and the peace process, measures to eradicate violence against women, women in international decision-making, and education for peace.

#### Contact addresses

Focal points for United Nations agencies who are preparing the meeting are:

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