

Eleanor Marx in Chicago



by Terry Moon

International Women's Day this year, when the totality of the economic-political crises in the U.S. would seem to justify an Orwellian view of 1984, focuses our vision, instead, on the unfolding of ever-new forces of revolution, none of which is more urgently present than the Women's Liberation Movement. One revolutionary feminist who greatly illuminates that inseparability of woman from revolution is Eleanor Marx, whose attempts to carry out Karl Marx's direction to go "lower and deeper" into the masses, as well as her own original contributions to what was then called "the Woman question," speak to today's movement in a way that demands a closer look at her life and work.

There is no better place to start, on this international day, than with the American tour she made in 1886 — for what Eleanor Marx brought to America was a demand for genuine internationalism that would have nothing to do with the chauvinism of all too many of the German socialists, who viewed U.S. workers as backward. She brought with her a deepening of the fight for the eight-hour day; her unique concept of revolutionary feminism; her practice of genuine Marxism.

THE MOVEMENT FROM BELOW

What was inspiring everyone at that moment in history was the movement in the U.S. of rank-and-file workers, women and men, fighting for the eight hour day — a struggle which took off after the end of the Civil War with what Karl Marx called "the seven leagued boots of the locomotive." Even the anarchists, who disagreed with the movement for the eight-hour day, were swept along because, as Albert Parsons, one of the Haymarket martyrs, explained: "we did not choose to stand aloof and be misunderstood by our fellow workers."

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Because of this powerful agitation from below, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (later to become the AF of L) made two motions at their international convention in 1884. The first established Labor Day. The second became May Day: "Resolved, . . . that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from and after May 1, 1886 . . ." The method? If peaceful negotiations for an eight-hour day were fruitless — a strike! By mid-April, 1886, just in anticipation of May Day, 30,000 workers were granted the eight or nine-hour day. Come May 1, 350,000 U.S. workers struck. The first May Day in Chicago was almost a general strike, with meatpacking, the stockyards, and the railroads shut down.

It was this tremendous movement that the capitalists were trying to destroy when, on May 4, a bomb was thrown by an *agent provocateur* into the crowd at Haymarket Square. There, working men, women and children had come to protest the gunning down of four McCormick Harvester workers who had been picketing on May 3 to keep 300 scabs from taking their jobs. Now eight Chicago anarchists were in jail, seven condemned to death. The police declared war on the workers, breaking into homes and printing offices, smashing meetings, beating and arresting workers as well as innocent bystanders by the hundreds. It was to this Chicago that Eleanor Marx came in September, 1886.

ELEANOR MARX "SPEAKS AMERICAN"

Eleanor Marx was tremendously moved by the events at Haymarket and outraged by the so-called trial which blatantly condemned men to death, not for the bomb, but for their anarchist ideas. Although both Karl and Eleanor Marx had battled with anarchists all their lives, every speech Eleanor gave in the U.S. began with a passionate defense of the Haymarket prisoners. But Eleanor Marx wanted her American trip to be much more than an expression of international solidarity for the condemned anarchists. She was here to continue, on American soil, the battle of ideas Karl Marx had fought in Europe.

The American socialists — who were primarily German in origin, refugees from the 1848 revolutions in Europe — had originally invited Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel to come to the U.S., to take advantage of the great new stage of labor struggles in order to build the American movement. But neither Liebknecht nor Bebel could speak good English. What was needed, Eleanor discovered, was someone to "speak English" to these German-American chapters in more ways than one — for their concept of revolution was so narrowed that many of them had made it a principle not to speak English, thus showing their contempt for the indigenous U.S. proletariat.

In contrast, what Eleanor saw was how American workers were struggling for socialism as a part of their fight for the eight-hour day. She stressed again and again the importance of joining with the U.S.-born workers, letting them take the lead, so that their innate socialism could develop.

Eleanor's Chicago speech revealed her determination to talk about socialism in a way that any worker would understand and to which they could feel an affinity. To do this, the body of her talk took a great deal from the form of Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto, explaining just what socialism is as opposed to what the bourgeoisie says it is.

What best proves that Eleanor's insistence on the revolutionary character of the native U.S. worker was correct, is the response her Chicago speech received. This is how Yvonne Kapp describes it in her biography of Eleanor Marx: "Large numbers had to be turned away from the doors of Aurora Turner Hall. Even then too many had been admitted: the gallery sagged and threatened to collapse under the weight of 'people standing on the forms, between the forms and almost upon each other,' while in the body of the hall the crowd was unable to applaud in unison because, as they said: 'We were packed so closely that some of us could not move our arms unless those standing by put theirs down to give us a farm.'"

At the same time, her whole attitude to what was then called "the woman question" brings out the todayness of women as Reason and as liberationists.

"THE WOMAN QUESTION"

Even in her speeches on what most would consider "other topics" she always brought in women. She talked of "men and women" and rarely used the word "man" alone because she meant both. In her Chicago speech, again following what

Marx had developed in the Manifesto, she showed how capitalism had dehumanized women and transformed love into prostitution and exploitation.

She also brought in a vision of what women are: "To the socialist a woman is a human being, and can no more be 'held' in common than a socialistic society could recognize slavery."

Shortly before her American tour, Eleanor had written on *The Woman Question* in a pamphlet co-authored with Edward Aveling. To get a better understanding of her important feminist contribution, it is important to look a little more closely at this pamphlet. It was supposedly a review of August Bebel's book, *Woman -- Past, Present and Future*, although she tells us in the pamphlet that, "we have wandered so far from Bebel along our own lines of thought . . ." Indeed, while those who write of Eleanor Marx as a feminist continually try to trace her feminism to the influence of Bebel, Engels and Ibsen, this pamphlet shows her as very different, certainly distinguishing her as a unique socialist feminist who was not following Bebel, Ibsen (whose play, *A Doll's House*, she both translated and acted in) or Engels (whose *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was published in 1884).

In *The Woman Question* Eleanor states that, "Women will find allies in the better sort of men, as the labourers are finding allies among the philosophers, artists and poets. But the one has nothing to hope from man as a whole, and the other has nothing to hope from the middle class as a whole." Eleanor had much of what is thought of as "socialist criticism" of bourgeois feminists — particularly that they didn't understand that "The position of women rests, as everything in our complex modern society rests, on an economic basis." But her more original criticisms were that, with the bourgeois feminism of her day, "The actual position of women in respect to men would not be very vitally touched," and that none of the bourgeois feminist demands "touches (women) in their sex relations."

She writes with passion of the unmarried woman, asking why it is that one can always pick her but not the unmarried man out of a crowd or family gathering? She describes what forced celibacy does to a developing human nature and attacks the practice that only men are permitted to "proffer affection," showing, by quoting Shakespeare, how that is not a natural state of life and pointing out how marriage is a purely economic arrangement. She takes up the age that people married, showing it to be a class question and opposed to human nature. She gives her views on how children should be told of sex and ends with her vision of human relations which (although she characterizes it as monogamy) is an expression of genuine reciprocity between men and women.

What those who try to tie Eleanor Marx as feminist to Bebel, Engels and Ibsen all ignore is her philosophic relationship to Karl Marx. It is not that, as his daughter, she had a unique experience, growing up in a household where her own and her sisters' intellectual curiosity and their interest in the revolutionary movements of their day were strongly nurtured. It is that there is no doubt whatsoever that it is from his writings that she got her inspiration to grapple with "the Woman Question."

It was his philosophy she was seeking to make real in all her writings and all her activities, whether that be with women, with the unskilled and unorganized workers, or in her internationalism. Indeed, those she had to fight the hardest were the elitist leaders of the Social-Democratic Party, who, in trying to play down the revolutionary road of Marx's Marxism, kept gossiping in letters to each other that Eleanor was trying to make a "god" of her "father" — as if Karl Marx was not the founder of the revolutionary socialism they all supposedly followed.

PRACTICING MARXISM

What becomes clear in reading *The Working-Class Movement in America*, written after the American tour, is how much Capital had influenced Eleanor. Following the way Marx had documented the conditions of the English workers in Capital, the conditions of the working-class in America are here likewise documented by the capitalists' own statistics — the "latest annual reports of the Bureau of Labour for the various States." The horrible working conditions that led to the upheavals of the 1880s and 1890s are revealed in the despair of the labor commissioners themselves as they report on woman and child labor, the 18-hour days, the com-

pany stores, the fins, the "black lists."

And a special awareness of the Black dimension is seen in the way Blacks are quoted to show "that the immense coloured population . . . is beginning to understand the wage-slavery question. Their purpose' (i.e. of the 'idle classes') 'is to keep us poor, so that we will be compelled to toil for their benefit . . . The coloured people are getting awake on this matter. The time is past when they can be deceived.'"

Significantly, the longest chapter in the book is on "Woman and Child Labor," and the meetings with American feminists are discussed in the chapter on "Some Working-Class Leaders." These are not working-class women but suffragists and although Eleanor criticizes them for their similarity to the English bourgeois feminists, she also points out how "American women suffragists differ from the English in one very important particular. They are ready and willing to listen to the ideas of other schools of thought . . . ready to engage in the more far-reaching struggle for the emancipation of the workers as well as in that for the emancipation of their own sex."

Beyond that, she singles out the suffragists as being "much more outspoken" than their English sisters: "They call things honestly by their names, and are not like the English, afraid of being thought 'improper.'" Eleanor Marx was not afraid of being thought "improper." She led a most extraordinary life and her contribution to today's Women's Liberation Movement and the American and British labor movements is only now beginning to be fully explored.

A DIRECTION FOR TODAY

What speaks to us today is not only that her insistence on the primacy of American workers as creative leaders has been proved historically in that every working-class advance made in America has been the result of a uniquely American proletariat, unseparated from the added dimension of Blacks and women. While it was in America in 1888 that Eleanor Marx first immersed herself in the movement for the eight-hour day, the passion workers revealed in Chicago to control their working day was something she was to experience again in the 1890s in England when she helped organize the lowest unskilled women workers in the slums of London's East End. There she did some of her most magnificent work, transcending the in-fighting of the Leftist groups because she was grounded both in her experience in Chicago and in Karl Marx's Capital where he contrasts the "pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man'" to the true "Magna Carta of a legally limited working-day" and the real struggles for the eight-hour day.

It is here, precisely, where she can help point a direction for today's Women's Liberation Movement. What was so important about Eleanor Marx was that she did not put women's liberation and socialism in separate compartments. If women's liberation wasn't on the official agenda, it was on hers, and it wasn't only lip service or just a tool to involve women in the "real" struggle as it was to so many of her contemporaries.

Doesn't the fact that she made "the woman question" her question, and never separated it from her activity in a period when women's liberation wasn't the most exciting movement, speak to what we are facing today? Can't we, as revolutionary feminists, bring in women's unique contribution in deepening the very concept of revolution, to every activity we engage in — be that support work for Central America, anti-nuclear/anti-war activity, our work in the factories and on the picket lines, and with the Black dimension? Wouldn't that be one way to help develop revolution, celebrate International Women's Day, and honor a truly international women's liberationist — Eleanor Marx?

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