

Acknowledging Our History: International Women's Day

For trade union women International Women's Day is steeped in a proud history of working women's fight for better working conditions, improved health and safety, better pay and the right to vote. International Women's Day, observed on March 8th since the early 1900s in America and Europe has grown to be recognized and celebrated by women in most countries around the world. Women's demands have changed over the century but the need for solidarity and action are very much alive today. For us to move forward its necessary to know our past. Let's celebrate women's history of struggle, solidarity and accomplishment on International Women's Day!

1908

Women's oppression and inequality was spurring women to become more vocal and active in campaigning for change. In 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay and voting rights.

1909

A declaration by the Socialist Party of America, the first National Woman's Day (NWD) was observed across the United States on February 28th and continued to be celebrated in February until 1913.

1910

A second International Conference of Working Women, held in Copenhagen, was attended by 100 women from 17 countries. Clara Zetkin, Leader of the 'Women's Office' for the Social Democratic Party in German, proposed that an annual Women's Day – a day to press for their demands - to be a celebrated on the same day every year in every country. Zetkin's proposal was unanimously approved and International Women's Day was born.

1911

International Women's Day (IWD) was honoured the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on 19 March. More than one million women and men attended IWD rallies campaigning for women's rights to work, to vote, to be trained, to hold public office and end discrimination.

1911

The Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911 and the garment workers' strike in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1912 best exemplify the plight of working women during American industrialization and reveal the urgency behind the call for a special day to recognize women.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City on March 25, 1911, was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the city of New York. 146 garment workers, most of them women, died in the fire because they were trapped. Managers tended to keep the factory doors to the stairwells and exits locked to

stop workers from leaving early. The fire led to legislation that improved factory safety standards and spurred the growth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

1912

In the great textile center of Lawrence, Massachusetts, 20,000 workers walked out of the mills in spontaneous protest against a cut in their weekly pay. A state law reduced the maximum hours of work for women and minors under 18 from 56 hours a week to 54. The companies reduced the hours to 54 but refused to raise hourly wages to make up for the reduction of hours. Under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World the strike became front-page news throughout the country.

During a parade through Lawrence, a group of women workers carried banners proclaiming "Bread and Roses". The demands of women workers for equal pay for equal work echoed throughout the country.

Bread and Roses, written by American poet, James Oppenheim***, and put to song by Martha Coleman became a part of the singing tradition of the American working-class and later became known as the anthem for international women's day.

1913-1914

Campaigning for peace on the eve of World War I Russian women observed their first International Women's Day on the last Sunday in February 1913. In 1913 International Women's Day was transferred to 8 March and this day has remained the global date for International Women's Day ever since. In 1914 women across Europe held rallies to campaign against the war and to express women's solidarity.

1917

On the last Sunday of February, Russian women began a strike for "bread and peace" in response to the death over 2 million Russian soldiers in war. Opposed by political leaders the women continued to strike until four days later the Czar was forced to abdicate and the provisional Government granted women the right to vote.

Bread and Roses***
—James Oppenheim

“Bread for all, and Roses, too” — a slogan of the women of the West

As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill-lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing, “Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.”

As we come marching, marching, we battle, too, for men –
For they are women’s children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes –
Hearts starve as well as bodies: Give us Bread, but give us Roses.

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of Bread;
Small art and love and beauty their drudgery
Yes, it is bread we fight for — but we fight for Roses, too.

As we come marching, marching, we bring the Greater Days –
The rising of the women means the rising of the race –
No more the drudge and idler — ten that toil where one reposes –
But a sharing of life’s glories: Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.