

genderstudies



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"How to Fight Fascism?" – Clara Zetkin's Feminism and Anti-Fascism

In the Spring of 2018, Dr. Ankica Čakardić, from the University of Zagreb, held a guest lecture on the oeuvre of Clara Zetkin. The event was organised by students of the programme of Gender Studies in cooperation with Dr. Victor Strazzeri, research fellow at the Historical Institute of the University of Bern. Clara Zetkin's work had a significant influence on Ankica Čakardić's research and she emphasises that we can still gain valuable insights from Zetkin's understanding of feminism and anti-fascism today.

I Vera Blaser*, Sebastian Funke** and Vanessa Näf***

Ankica Čakardić opened her lecture by introducing the life and work of Clara Zetkin (1857-1933), who was a Marxist theorist, socialist politician, anti-war activist, and a committed advocate for women's rights. In the course of her life, Zetkin became known as the "mother of women's movement in Germany" and, as such, she took an uncompromising view, arguing that the source of women's social hardship lay in capitalism. Hence, she considered the possibility of women's liberation to lie within the self-empowerment of the working class. She was also opposed to the "bourgeois feminist" position to support the restriction of the vote by property or income, arguing that women should fight for the right to work, have equal pay, paid maternity leave, free child-care facilities, and education. Moreover, she theorised at length on many subjects including marriage and sexual freedom. She strongly encouraged the process of turning the working women's potential power into actual power by organising them in trade unions. In contrast to many of her contemporaries in the socialist movement, she saw the fight for changes in the power relations between women and men as a challenge for the present, rather than a task for some indefinite socialist future.

In addition to her feminist dedication, Clara Zetkin is also renowned for her in-depth political analysis, especially concerning the problem of fascism, as stated by Čakardić. This analysis involved identifying key features of fascism. Thus, Zetkin argued that fascism's emergence was tied to the economic crisis of capitalism and the decline of its institutions. She further pointed out that fascism possessed a mass character, with a special appeal to petty bourgeois layers threatened by the decline of the capitalist order, and that the ideology of "national chauvinism" was used by fascist leaders as a cover to incite militarism and imperialist war. She further stated that important sections of the capitalist class supported and financed the fascist movement, seeing it as a way to counter the threat of proletarian revolution, and that, once in power, fascism led to the resurgence of class contradictions. Hence, Zetkin believed that the perspective of a revolutionary fight for governmental power, based on an alliance of the exploited and oppressed social classes, was essen-

tial for victory over fascism. While Clara Zetkin was right about her analysis, the hoped-for revolution of the working class in Germany failed to take place. In 1933, after being a representative of the communist party since 1920, Clara Zetkin had to flee into exile to the Soviet Union because of the Nazi takeover and the persecution of communists.

Following Clara Zetkin's analysis of fascism, Ankica Čakardić pointed out that understanding fascism today is not merely a historical question. Rather, fascism as a product of capitalism must be questioned, as well as the relationship between libertarian capitalist democracy and racism. With the twenty-first century unfolding, and with capitalism having entered a period of social crises, marked by escalating attacks on the rights and living conditions of working class people and minority groups, along with sharpening social polarisation, it is precisely situations like the current one that can give rise to fascist movements. Thus, these movements recognise social crises but aim to shift the blame away from the capitalist system and towards marginalised groups, which serve as scapegoats, such as immigrants, people of colour, Jews, Sinti and Roma, and other 'Others'. To echo Clara Zetkin, as these attacks escalate, they will need to be answered by people fighting to defend their unions; by supporters of women's rights fighting to defend the right to abortion; by those standing up to capitalist environmental destruction; by those fighting anti-immigrant violence and deportations – in short, by all those who struggle in the interests of the oppressed and exploited. In her examination of Clara Zetkin's accomplishments, Ankica Čakardić concluded that Zetkin's work serves not only as an analytic research tool to examine fascism, but also as an inspiration for feminist political activism.

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