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Women's reolution at work

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The renowned Age of Revolution encompasses the period between the American Revolution (1776) and the so-called Spring of Nations in 1848, this being the height of the revolutionary movements in Europe in the 19th century, though it may be considered just the tip of the iceberg as far as civil rights movements for people from all walks of life are concerned. The changes that occurred throughout this timespan intended to move from feudal and absolutist systems, considered old-fashioned and ill-suited, to constitutionalist states and republics that would be able to heed the new values, e.g. liberalism, nationalism and socialism, as well as the demands of the working classes, enduring the harmful effects of industrialisation. Working people had been flowing into large industrial cities for over a century since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, leaving behind their home places and settling in overcrowded, rundown dwellings in appalling living conditions. The shift from working at home to working in factories brought along a number of issues that would be the motivation for setting up trade unions, namely the long working hours (between 12 and 14 hours per day), the low wages, the cruel discipline and the fierce system of fines that was applied, and the numerous accidents and health issues that ensued. Despite the overall negative conditions, women and children were among those who suffered the most, especially because the former's wages were regarded as secondary earnings and thus less important than men's. Consequently, from 1850s onwards, trade unions began to fight for better paid workers and women were initially excluded from these structures be it as members or leaders, being supported by social reformers instead. As a case in point, it is worth mentioning Clementina Black who, in 1888, set forth a demand for equal pay between men and women in the UK and the Bryant and May match factory strike which was held in the same year. Bearing in mind this social and historical context, our aim with this paper is two-fold: not only do we seek to focus on unionist movements in the last half of the 19th century in the European context as a means to fight against conservative and slavery-like practices in the workplace but we also wish to emphasise the place and importance of working-class women in this general workers' assertion, particularly in their attempt to gain equal pay, a true reolution that would be the motivational beacon for 20th century movements, such as that of the suffragettes.

Keywords: industrialisation; workers' struggle; trade unions; strikes; equal pay; women's rights.

Bionotes

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