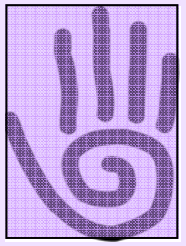


FROM MARCH 8, 1908 TO MARCH 8, 2008 ...



# 100 YEARS OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLE:

## *The Origins and Evolution of March 8 as International Women's Day*



Page 4.

International Women's Day, March 8

**Women's Meeting**

Will be held at
32 Lr. Ormond Quay, Dublin,
On SUNDAY, MARCH 8, at 8 p.m.

SPEAKERS: MRS. H. SHEEHY-SKEFFINGTON, MRS. RIEDA DEVINE & MRS. E. McGREGOR

Come to hear the women's point of view on the cost of living, health services, etc. Make your husband come too.








*Sheila Conroy*



*Padraigín NíMhurchú*



*Patricia O'Donovan*



***Inez McCormack***



***May O'Brien***



***Rosheen Callender***

RESEARCH BY *THERESA MORIARTY*
PRODUCED BY *SIPTU'S EQUALITY UNIT,* MARCH 2008

# 100 Years of Women's Struggle: The Origins and Evolution of March 8 as International Women's Day

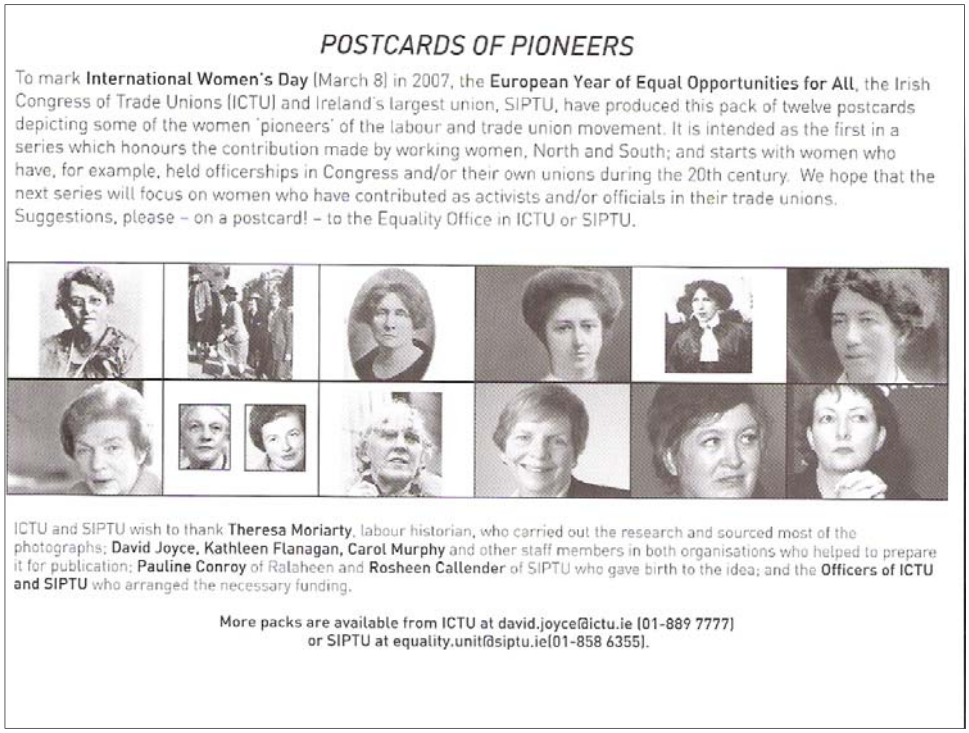
## FOREWORD

SIPTU is proud to publish this brief history of International Women's Day, in March 2008, to commemorate 'A Hundred Years of Women's Struggle'. For it was on the 8th March, 1908 that socialist women in New York—inspired by their sisters in the city's clothing and textiles industry—held a mass meeting to demand women's suffrage and an 8-hour working day. This date was to become a major landmark in the inter-woven history of women's struggle for social, economic, industrial, political and human rights—a struggle progressed mainly by socialists and trade unionists, both male and female, in many countries.

We are indebted to labour historian, **Theresa Moriarty**, who researched this history. It was Theresa who also, last year, carried out the research for the 'Postcards of Pioneers' produced by SIPTU and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to mark International Women's Day in March 2007. The postcards - 12 in all - depicted some of the women pioneers of the labour and trade union movement in the 20th century (see below). Some of these women feature in this publication as well.

Thanks are also due to our General Secretary, **Joe O'Flynn**, for supporting the production of this booklet and to **Kathleen Flanagan** and **Eva Geraghty** who helped me to prepare Theresa's material for publication.

**Rosheen Callender,**
**National Equality Secretary.**
February 2008



# THE ORIGINS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Nowadays, the 8th of March - International Women's Day (IWD) - is celebrated by women throughout the world. Since 1975, the United Nations has marked it as an annual, world-wide event, uniting the global community of women around a common goal.

In Ireland, women have commemorated International Women's Day regularly since the 1970s. But the origins of International Women's Day go back much further than the late 20th century, to the inspiration of the industrial struggle of women one hundred years ago.

In 1908, women workers across the world were protesting against their economic exploitation - against low pay, long hours and devastating working conditions. They combined with the new energetic movement committed to winning the vote for women. It was a powerful combination. A century ago, women on every continent mounted an industrial, social and political struggle for change, on a scale never seen before. The start of International Women's Day as an annual commemoration can be traced back to this movement; and to one particular industrial struggle in the USA.

## IN NEW YORK ...

On March 8, 1908, socialist women in New York, mobilised by the industrial militancy of women workers from the clothing and textile trades in the city, held a mass meeting for an eight-hour day and women's suffrage.

**Leonora O'Reilly**, an Irish American trade unionist, was among the speakers (see below). The following year, at the end of February (1909), women held an International Woman's Day event in the city. But in fact the idea of international action had been mooted in the previous year.




New York garment workers on strike

## IN GERMANY ...

In 1907, women from fourteen countries had met in Germany, to launch an international campaign for women's economic, social and political rights. At their second meeting, which took place in Copenhagen in 1910, the German delegate, **Clara Zetkin**, inspired by the women of New York, proposed that an annual International Women's Day be held in each country, when women would demonstrate independently for their own demands. The threat of international war in Europe later led the women to add calls for peace to their International Women's Day slogans.

The first truly **International** Women's Day was held in 1911 and it took some years for IWD to take the shape and date that we know today. In the United States, International Women's Day was initially held on the last weekend of February. Women in Austria, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Russia organised International Women's Day in mid-March.

**Leonora O'Reilly,** 1870-1927

*Leonora O'Reilly, a New York trade union organiser, was the daughter of Irish immigrants. Her working life began at the age of 11; and she joined the Knights of Labour in 1886. She went on to form working women's organisations, including a women's section of the United Garment Workers of America. She joined the Women's Trade Union League in 1903, becoming its President in 1909. She was active in the garment workers' struggles in 1909-1910, and led the investigation into the 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirt-waist Company, when 146 people died. Leonora O'Reilly was an active campaigner for women's suffrage, a member of the Socialist Party of America, and a founder member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People.*

## WORLD WAR I

In 1914, however, the international solidarity of Europe's socialist parties was shattered as country after country backed the War. Only the socialist women retained their international solidarity; in 1915, they met together for peace, in Berne. Generally, however, International Women's Day gatherings were halted by the War.

## IN RUSSIA ...

In Russia, women workers, who had taken up International Women's Day as a regular event before the War, continued sporadic protests against the war and food shortages. In 1917, women's strikes and demonstrations brought Petrograd (now St Petersburg) to a halt on International Women's Day. The disturbances lasted days. The Tsar abdicated, and a provisional government was formed. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks turned this 'February Revolution' into what became 'The October Revolution' and the formation of the new Soviet Russia.

From 1919, the Bolsheviks organised a Women's Department, and International Women's Day was launched as a national holiday in Russia. In 1921, when delegates from all over the world met at the Communist International in Moscow, they adopted International Women's Day, to pay tribute to the Russian women's revolt of February 23, 1917. This became March 8 when the Bolsheviks brought their old Russian calendar into line with that of the western countries.

## IN IRELAND ...

In 1908, Irish women's new industrial militancy and suffrage campaign mirrored the international pattern.

Belfast's women mill workers led a general strike throughout the city's linen industry in 1906, seeking a pay rise of a shilling a week – which was ten per cent of their weekly wage.



MARY GALWAY

In 1908, the Irish Trade Union Congress had a woman on its national executive. **Mary Galway**, secretary of the Textile Operatives' Society of Ireland, was elected to the executive in 1907, largely because of her role in the 1906 strike. She was not only the first women in Ireland to hold an executive seat, but probably the first to do so in any country in the world. At the 1908 annual conference of Congress, she called on Irish trade unions to support equal political rights for women.



CATHERINE MAHON

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation executive council had two reserved seats for women on their executive from 1907, and **Catherine Mahon** and **Elizabeth Larmour,** were the first women elected to them.

Women won other openings in the Irish trade union movement within a few years. The **Irish Women Workers' Union** was formed in Dublin in 1911. The picture on the next page shows members of the IWWU outside Liberty Hall in 1913.




On the steps of Liberty Hall: Delia Larkin, Secretary of the IWWU (centre front row), with members of the IWWU who were arrested during the 1913 Dublin Lockout.

Women shop workers won their own section in the **Irish Drapers' Assistants Association** in 1912.



Cissy Cahalan (front row, middle) and members of the Irish Drapers' Assistants Association

1908 was a rallying year for women on other fronts as well. The 'Votes for Women' campaign began a new phase when the Irish Women's Franchise League formed that year. A journal, *Bean na h'Eireann*, began the same year, aimed at nationalist women. It was edited by **Helena Molony** (see next page), who became secretary of the Irish Women Workers' Union in 1915.

Within a few years women, who had been largely excluded from public life by custom, had made themselves visible throughout Irish society. Women's organisation spread to professional and political life, to social and religious societies. Between 1901 and 1914, Inghinidhe na h'Eireann, the Irish Association of Women Graduates, the Women's National Health Association, the Irish Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, the Church League for Women's Suffrage, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Irish National Party and the Ulster Women's Unionist Association, were formed - all testa-

ments to Irish women's increasing public role a hundred years ago. From 1912 to 1920, a women's suffrage newspaper, the *Irish Citizen*, reported on women's growing activism.


HELENA MOLONY

## THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

International Women's Day has taken many forms since its origins in the struggles of working women. It remained a public holiday in the Soviet calendar. Elsewhere, it became a day when women mobilised around an international cause, retaining the socialist founders' themes of equality, the vote and peace as a central focus. Increasingly, it also became a day of resistance.

In Shanghai, International Women's Day demonstrations heralded the insurrection of 1926. In Europe, IWD took the form of organised resistance to fascism in the 1930s. In Spain, in 1936, **Dolores Ibarruri**, better known as **'La Pasionaria'** for her passionate speeches, led thousands of women on a Madrid rally to defend the republic. Elsewhere, in 1936, women demonstrated against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). In 1938, Czechoslovakian women carried red flags to an anti-Fascist meeting on the last International Women's Day before the Nazi invasion. War, and the rise of Nazi power in Europe, prevented any commemoration of International Women's Day during the War years.


Page 4.

International Women's Day, March 8

**Women's Meeting**

Will be held at
32 Lr. Ormond Quay, Dublin,
On SUNDAY, MARCH 8, at 8 p.m.

SPEAKERS: MRS. H. SHEEHY-SKEFFINGTON, MRS. FRIEDA DEVINE & MRS. E. McGREGOR

Come to hear the women's point of view on the cost of living, health services, etc. Make your husband come too.

In Ireland, International Women's Day was observed mostly by women in the Communist Party, or the Irish Workers' League, as it was then known. In 1936, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of International Women's Day, **Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington** joined **Frieda Devine** and **Mrs E McGregor** to speak at a women's meeting on 8 March. An advertisement for this meeting appeared in the *'Irish Workers' Voice'* on March 7, 1936 (left) and it (barely legible in this reproduction) exhorted women to:

**"Come to hear the women's point of view on the cost of living, health services, etc. Make your husband come too."**

The Conditions of Employment Bill (which became an Act in 1937), was one of these women's targets at that time. Many saw the Bill's measures to prevent or control women in certain occupations as an effort to deny women the right to work. In February 1936, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, widowed during the Easter Rising, told an audience of the Women's Citizens' Association that the position of women had worsened since 1916.

After the Second World War, International Women's Day was established throughout Eastern Europe as a public holiday, drawing more on the traditions of Mother's Day, and sometimes detached from its history of resistance and protest.

In the post-war years, Irish women's commemoration of International Women's Day remained low-key. The political programme was dominated by the mobilisation of the Irish Housewives Association on the pressing issues of housing, health and high prices.

Behind the divisive national issues of the Mother and Child Bill, and the growing stream of emigration, international politics was being shaped by the Cold War. In 1951, the women's section of the Communist Party commemorated International Women's Day by sending international greetings to other progressive women around the world. Articles on the origins of International Women's Day were published in the *Irish Workers' Voice* from time to time (see below, March 7, 1936).

In 1952, a National Association of Women met in London at an International Women's Day conference with 1,400 delegates, around issues of health, education, housing and the cost of living. A number of women attended from Ireland.

In 1960, women returned to Copenhagen - where International Women's Day was first adopted - for the fiftieth anniversary of the Women's Socialist International.


This Sunday Is The International Day of Working Women

Women's Day In Many Countries

How It Started : By FRIEDA DEVINE

Interestingly, during the 1950s, the origins of International Women's Day were challenged by accounts of a much earlier protest on 8 March, in 1857, by New York women workers. Some research claims there is no evidence for this event, and even suggest this story had it origins in cold war politics, by attempting to distance International Women's Day from the Communist movement.


IRISH WOMEN WORKERS' UNION.

(Head Office : Liberty Hall.)

Entrance Fee ... ... 6d.

Contributions ... ... 2d. per week.

Join now. Call in at the above Office any day between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. All classes of workers are eligible to join this Union.

Don't miss the Sunday evening Socials held in Liberty Hall. Dancing and Singing. Small Entrance Fee. All Friends Welcome.

The usual Monthly Social of Choir Members and Friends will be held in Liberty Hall on Sunday, December 1st. Tickets, 1s. each, now on Sale.

Choir practice will be, as usual, on Tuesday and Thursday evening at 8 p.m.

Irish Dancing on Friday evening at 8 p.m.

All communications for this column to be addressed to—

"D.L,"
18 Beresford Place.

"An injury to One is the concern of All."

—THE—

Irish Worker,

EDITED BY JIM LARKIN.

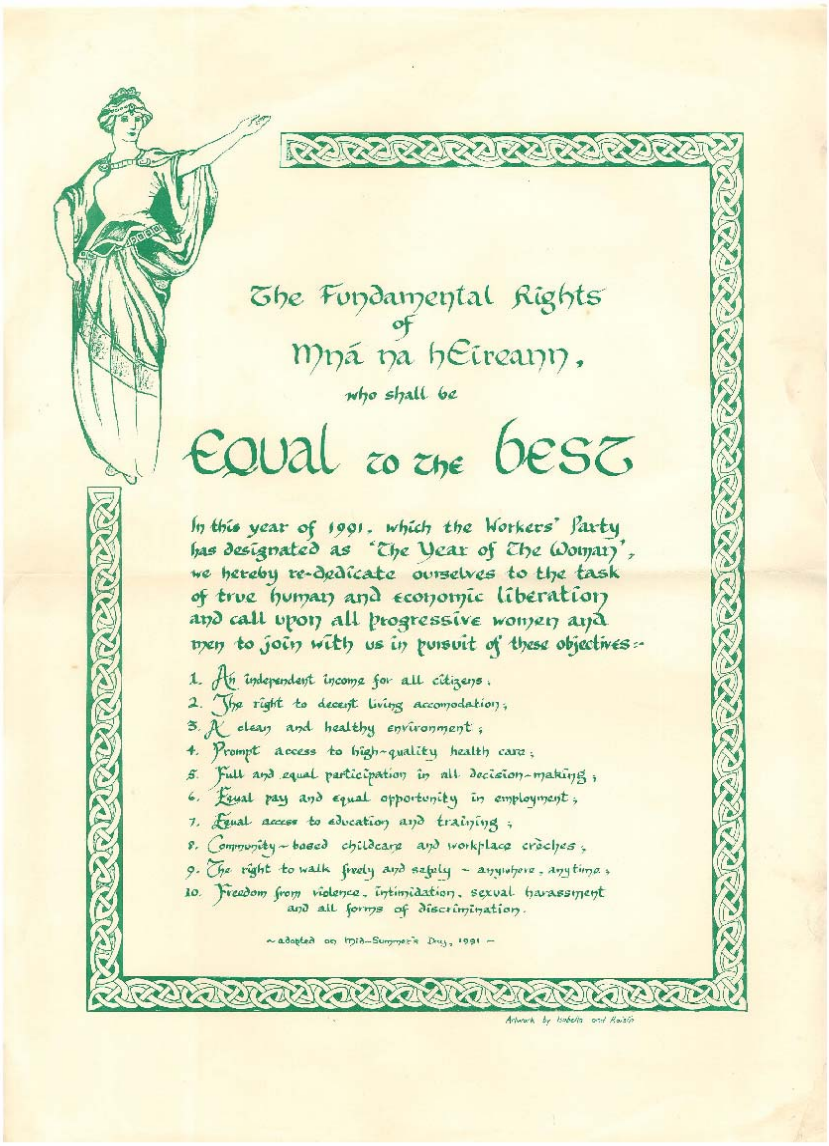
IWWU advertisement, November 30, 1912

## IRELAND

International Women's Day took firm root in Ireland from the 1970s, as a day of celebrations and demands. It has been commemorated in a variety of venues and in different forms, as parades, protests, pickets and parties. It has served as a reminder of our past and as a pointer to our future.

The celebration started among women's organisations who laid claim to its legacy, and framed it around their own concerns. Its internationalism has been marked by its global celebration, sometimes with an international theme, other times to express national concerns and local campaigns.

In keeping with the origins of International Women's Day, Irish women trade unionists have been prominent in the Day's revival since the 1970s. Through the Trade Union Women's Forum in the 1970s and 1980s, the Women's Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Women's Equality Committees of various individual unions, March 8 has become an important date in the trade union calendar. This year – 2008 - International Women's Day is the closing day of the ICTU's Biennial Women's Conference.



The Fundamental Rights
of
Mná na hÉireann,
who shall be
Equal to the best

In this year of 1991, which the Workers' Party has designated as 'The Year of The Woman', we hereby re-dedicate ourselves to the task of true human and economic liberation and call upon all progressive women and men to join with us in pursuit of these objectives:-

1. An independent income for all citizens;
2. The right to decent living accomodation;
3. A clean and healthy environment;
4. Prompt access to high-quality health care;
5. Full and equal participation in all decision-making;
6. Equal pay and equal opportunity in employment;
7. Equal access to education and training;
8. Community-based childcare and workplace crèches;
9. The right to walk freely and safely - anywhere, anytime;
10. Freedom from violence, intimidation, sexual harassment and all forms of discrimination.

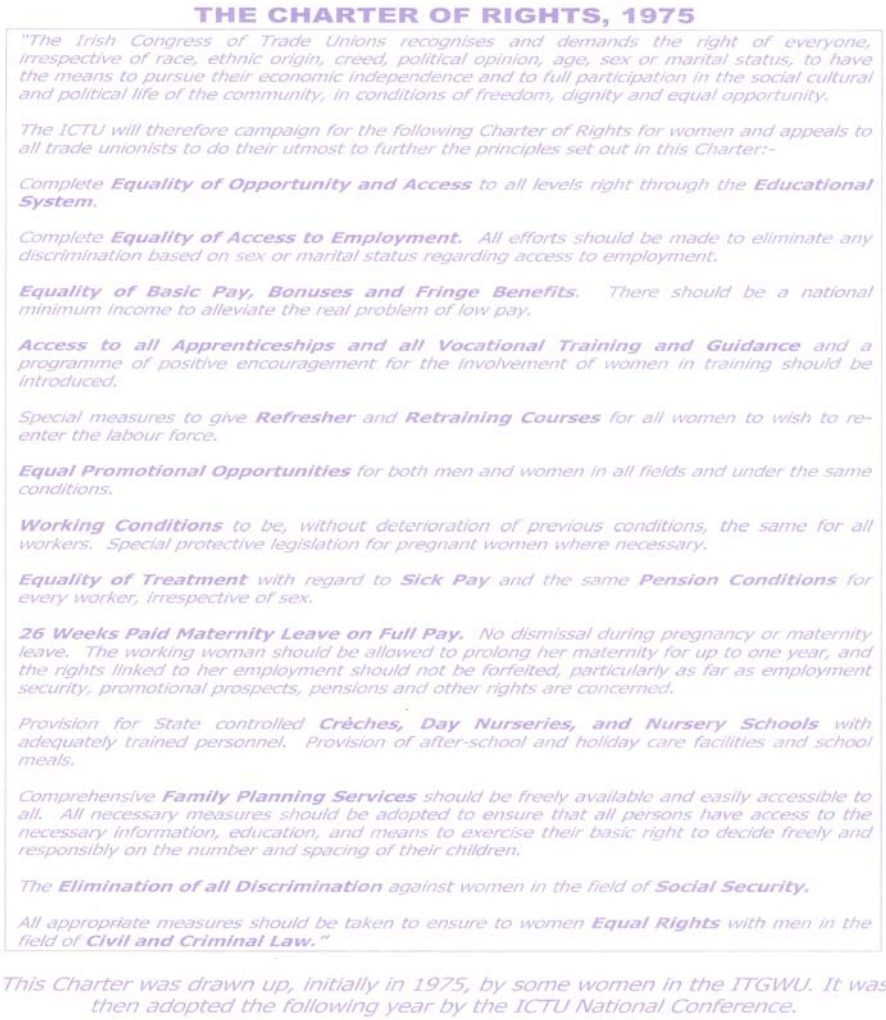
- adopted on Mid-Summer's Day, 1991 -

Artwork by Lisbeth and Kevin

SIPTU, (which was formed in 1990) and its two main predecessors, the ITGWU and the FWUI (which had incorporated the IWWU in 1984), has commemorated International Women's Day annually. Since 1975 when the ITGWU launched its first Women's Charter of Rights on International Women's Day in International Women's Year, it has been a day when programmes and platforms publicise women's issues.

In 1998, SIPTU's Women's Committee issued badges to mark International Women's Day, with ribbons in the suffragette colours of green and purple. In 2001, SIPTU published a **Working Women's Charter** to update the 1975-76 Charter for International Women's Day and to mark the start of the new millennium. Two years later, the union hosted a conference on globalisation and women. In 2007, SIPTU commemorated women's contribution to the history of the Irish trade union movement in a series of '**Postcards of Pioneers**' introducing some of the trade union women who held leading positions during the 20th century (see cover and page 2).

Today, in addition to trade unions, political parties and women's organisations, many international agencies, government ministers and civic bodies also commemorate International Women's Day. In 1975, the United Nations decided to dedicate the year as International Women's Year and to formally mark March 8 as International Women's Day for all member-states; and this led to many more governmental and non-governmental bodies marking IWD in some way.



THE CHARTER OF RIGHTS, 1975

"The Irish Congress of Trade Unions recognises and demands the right of everyone, irrespective of race, ethnic origin, creed, political opinion, age, sex or marital status, to have the means to pursue their economic independence and to full participation in the social cultural and political life of the community, in conditions of freedom, dignity and equal opportunity.

The ICTU will therefore campaign for the following Charter of Rights for women and appeals to all trade unionists to do their utmost to further the principles set out in this Charter:-

Complete **Equality of Opportunity and Access** to all levels right through the **Educational System**.

Complete **Equality of Access to Employment.** All efforts should be made to eliminate any discrimination based on sex or marital status regarding access to employment.

**Equality of Basic Pay, Bonuses and Fringe Benefits.** There should be a national minimum income to alleviate the real problem of low pay.

**Access to all Apprenticeships and all Vocational Training and Guidance** and a programme of positive encouragement for the involvement of women in training should be introduced.

Special measures to give **Refresher** and **Retraining Courses** for all women to wish to re-enter the labour force.

**Equal Promotional Opportunities** for both men and women in all fields and under the same conditions.

**Working Conditions** to be, without deterioration of previous conditions, the same for all workers. Special protective legislation for pregnant women where necessary.

**Equality of Treatment** with regard to **Sick Pay** and the same **Pension Conditions** for every worker, irrespective of sex.

**26 Weeks Paid Maternity Leave on Full Pay.** No dismissal during pregnancy or maternity leave. The working woman should be allowed to prolong her maternity for up to one year, and the rights linked to her employment should not be forfeited, particularly as far as employment security, promotional prospects, pensions and other rights are concerned.

Provision for State controlled **Crèches, Day Nurseries, and Nursery Schools** with adequately trained personnel. Provision of after-school and holiday care facilities and school meals.

Comprehensive **Family Planning Services** should be freely available and easily accessible to all. All necessary measures should be adopted to ensure that all persons have access to the necessary information, education, and means to exercise their basic right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children.

The **Elimination of all Discrimination** against women in the field of **Social Security.**

All appropriate measures should be taken to ensure to women **Equal Rights** with men in the field of **Civil and Criminal Law."**

This Charter was drawn up, initially in 1975, by some women in the ITGWU. It was then adopted the following year by the ICTU National Conference.

In Ireland, the practice has varied, with some political parties regularly marking International Women's Day. Others have been doing so in more recent years - and particularly in election years. The Labour Party has generally issued statements or documents on issues of the day which had particular relevance for women. The Workers' Party in 1991 launched a Charter of Rights titled *'**The Fundamental Rights of Mná na hEireann** who shall be **EQUAL TO THE BEST**'* (see page 8).

In 1995, the three-party 'Rainbow' government (made up of Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic Left), agreed that it would announce the launch of its new **National Anti-Poverty Strategy** on International Women's Day. This was done by the then Minister for Social Welfare in Copenhagen, during a UN World Conference on Poverty, specifically to make the point that tackling poverty and advancing women's social and economic rights are inextricably linked.

Over the years the **National Women's Council of Ireland**, representing women's associations throughout the country, has co-ordinated and publicised events. In 2006, for example, it organised a major public awareness campaign to 'Say No to Germany's exploitation of Women during the FIFA World Cup, 2006'. This was to support an international campaign ***'Buying Sex is not a Sport'*** as it was estimated that thousands of women would be trafficked into Germany that year for purposes of prostitution.



# NOT ONLY EQUALITY, BUT QUALITY TOO

In this year of 2001, SIPTU pledges itself to work for the social and economic liberation of all workers irrespective of sex, age, race, religion, disability, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, political opinion, membership of the traveller community – or of a trade union …

Our ten key objectives can be summarised as below, with further elaboration of each point overleaf:

- Fundamental social, economic and human rights for all – to include equal access to education, employment and the necessities of life in the 21st century;
- Equal pay and conditions and a higher minimum wage;
- Equal treatment as regards take-home pay; and an adequate guaranteed individual income for all;
- The right to work flexible and family-friendly hours; and a standard 30-hour week for all workers;
- The right to work in a safe, healthy environment, free from all forms of physical and psychological hazard; with the provision of such essential facilities as high-quality, affordable childcare;
- The right to stop work, temporarily, for caring or other reasons, and not be punished through loss of promotion, pension, PRSI or other rights;
- The right to stop work permanently, on an individual retirement income capable of ensuring dignity, self-sufficiency and independence in old age;
- A modernised social protection system that is genuinely worker-friendly and family-friendly;
- Equal representation and decision-making rights on all work-related bodies such as company and pension trustee boards; and in the legislature, judiciary and executive of the State;
- Promotion of multi-culturalism and diversity in all parts of Irish society; solidarity with, and support for, disadvantaged workers world-wide.

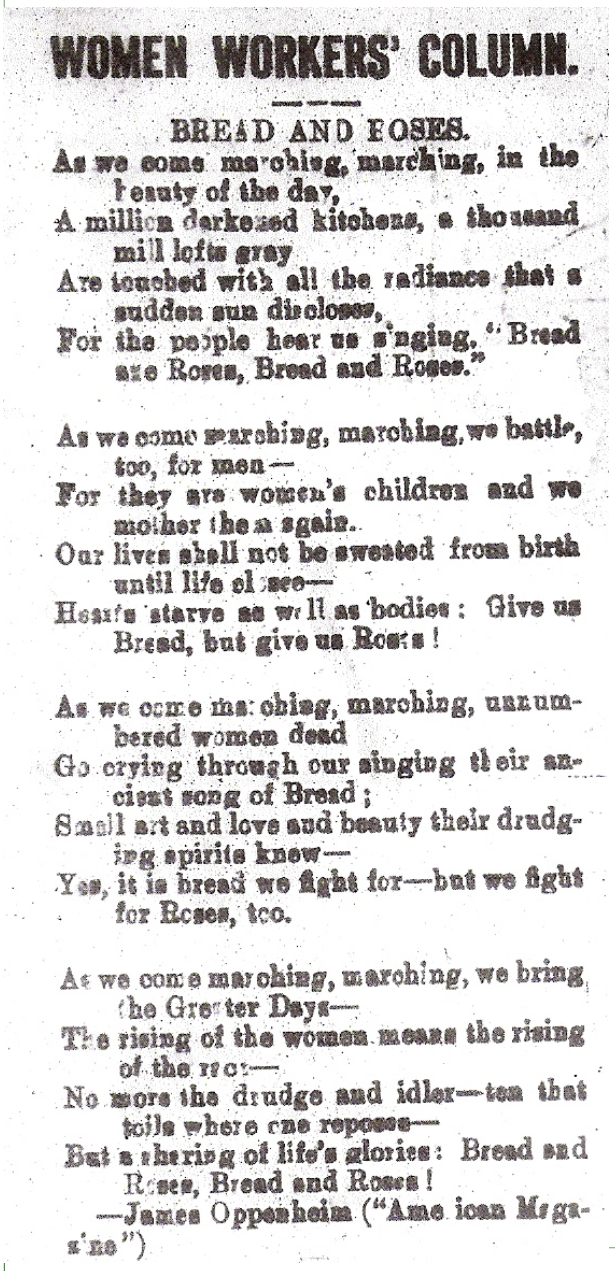
***A WORKERS' CHARTER OF RIGHTS FOR THE 21st CENTURY*** ***SIPTU 2001***

In 2007, socialist women, including a delegate from the Irish Labour Party, commemorated one hundred years of a global women's movement in Stuttgart, Germany where the first International Conference of Socialist Women had met.

**The spirit of International Women's Day will be commemorated once again this year across Ireland. This history is still being written.**

## BREAD AND ROSES

The women's anthem, ***'Bread and Roses'***, traditionally sung on International Women's Day, also has its origins in the struggle of working women before the First World War. It was written during the 1912 Lawrence mill workers' strike.



WOMEN WORKERS' COLUMN.

BREAD AND ROSES.

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 drudging spirits knew—
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 toils where one reposes—
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses!

—James Oppenheim ("American Magazine")

The words of *Bread and Roses* first appeared in Ireland in Delia Larkin's column, 'The Woman Worker' in the *Irish Worker* in November 1912 .

A more legible version of the words reproduced here appears overleaf.

*Information from:*


Temma Kaplan, *'On the Socialist Origins of International Women's Day'*, Feminist Studies, 1985.
Kathy Porter, *'March 8, International Women's Day'*, Marxism Today, March 1980.
Hilda Scott, *'Women and Socialism: Experiences from Eastern Europe'*, 1976.

## BREAD AND ROSES
Words by James Oppenheim

As we go 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 go 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 go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for - but we fight for roses, too!

As we go 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!

# *From March 8, 1908 to March 8, 2008*
# *100 YEARS OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLE:*
## *The Origins and Evolution of International Women's Day*

Research by: *Theresa Moriarty*
Published March 2008 by: *SIPTU's Equality Unit*

Further information from the Equality Unit, SIPTU, Liberty Hall, Dublin 1, Tel. 01-858 6355 or equality.unit@siptu,ie

