

Anarchism, a History of Fighting for Women's Freedom

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The Anarchist movement long fought against women's oppression. And many prominent figures in the women's movement were Anarchists. The following are some examples, but there are many more.

Michael Bakunin

Michael Bakunin, a founder of Anarchism, was a fighter for women's freedom. "In the eyes of the law", Bakunin noted, "even the best educated, talented, intelligent woman is inferior to even the most ignorant man".

For the poor underprivileged women, said Bakunin, there is the threat of "hunger and cold", and the threat of sexual assault and prostitution.

Even within the family, women are too often the "slaves of their husbands", and their children are "deprived of a decent education, condemned to a brutish life of servitude and degradation". Instead of this, "equal rights must belong to both men and women" (Bakunin). Women must be economically independent, "free to forge their own way of life".

This requires united workers struggle against the bosses. As Bakunin put it: "Oppressed women! Your cause is indissolubly tied to the common cause of all the exploited workers — men and women!"

Lucy Parsons

Lucy Parsons, the Black woman Anarchist militant, fought for the rights of workers, Blacks and women in the USA.

In her speech to the founding conference of the revolutionary trade union- the Industrial Workers of the World — in 1905 Lucy Parsons paid close attention to the oppression of working class women. She noted how that oppression was used by the bosses to reduce the wages of the entire working class: "We, the women of this country, have no ballot even if we wished to use it ... but we have our labor ... Whenever wages are to be reduced, the capitalist class uses women to reduce them."

At a time when the left tended to ignore the plight of prostitutes, Lucy Parsons told the conference that she also spoke for "my sisters whom I can see in the night when I go out in Chicago".

Emma Goldman

Emma Goldman was another US Anarchist militant. She was born in a Jewish ghetto in Russia, and left for the USA in the 1880s where she was textile worker. Working in the factories as a seamstress, she became a militant agitator and speaker after the hanging of Anarchist labor organizers in Chicago in 1886.

Emma Goldman believed in revolutionary trade unionism. Emma Goldman stood for the rights of women. She rejected male domination in the family and called for equality between men and women. She opposed capitalism, which reduces women to cheap labor and sex objects. Emma criticized the middle-class reformist feminists of her time for being detached from the economic realities of working class women.

Emma was repeatedly imprisoned: for calling on the unemployed to organize to demand bread; for distributing information on birth control; and for organizing against World War One. She was deported in 1919 and was active in both the Russian Revolution (1917–21) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–9).

Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger was an American nurse, Anarchist, and birth control activist. Her ideas on “family limitation” (limiting the number of children in a family) were inspired by her association with Emma Goldman. Her journal *The Woman Rebel* (1914) bore the slogan “No Gods, No Masters” and carried articles by Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre.

Margaret Sanger participated in the Patterson Textile Strike of 1913 which she wrote about in Hippolyte Havel’s *Revolutionary Almanac*. She contributed articles to Havel’s *Revolt*, Emma Goldman’s *Mother Earth*, Alexander Berkman’s *The Blast* and *The Modern School* magazine.

Margaret Sanger took an interest in medical research that showed that hormones could be used to prevent ovulation in women. She was responsible for the fundraising for the development of the modern Birth Control Pill.

Argentina

In Argentina, women Anarchists set up the revolutionary *The Voice of the Woman* newspaper in the 1890s.

This was one of the “first ... instances in Latin America of the fusion of feminist ideas with a revolutionary and working- class orientation and differs from the feminism found elsewhere in Latin America ... which centered on educated middle-class women and ... reflected their specific concerns”.

The same study continues: “The distinctiveness of *The Voice of the Woman* as an Anarchist paper lay in its recognition of the specificity of women’s oppression. It called on women to mobilize against their oppression both as women and as workers” (Maxine Molyneux, *Latin American Perspectives*, 13 (1), 1986).

China

In China, the Anarchist movement pioneered a distinct Anarchist position on women’s liberation. In contrast to the Chinese nationalists, who wanted women’s liberation only as a way of “building the nation”, women Anarchists like He Zhen argued for class struggle and the right of women to determine their own lives.

He Zhen linked women’s rights to the call for a complete social revolution; she knew the “the oppression of women to be linked to modern class divisions and economic exploitation as well as traditional culture” (Peter Zarrow, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 47(4), 1988).

Spanish Revolution

In Spain in 1936, the working class organized a revolution for Anarchism. Workers seized the land and factories, managed them and their communities without bosses or governments and organized a workers army to defend against Fascism and dictatorship.

Women also made gains. Women played a full part in the revolutionary struggle. Women were everywhere — Women were active in the workers collectives, and workers army where they fought alongside the men as equals. Women were taking up the fight against the sexist attitudes of the past which have no place in any real revolution.

The Anarchist women's organization, Mujeres Libres (Free Women) had 30,000 members. Mujeres Libres organized working-class women. It believed that women must achieve freedom by working together and working in their communities. It stood for gender equality, women's education and empowerment, and class struggle. It worked closely with the Anarchist youth (FIJL-Iberian Anarchist Youth Federation) and trade unions (CNT-National Workers Confederation and FAI-Iberian Anarchist Federation).

Mujeres Libres believed that women must free themselves not by electing women "leaders", but by organizing themselves, building women's self-confidence in their capabilities through projects where they could demonstrate and experience a sense of their own capacity as women (this was called "propaganda by the deed") and by confronting those who would deny them equal status and treatment in society (this was called "direct action"). Before the revolution, Mujeres Libres organized women workers and distributed information on contraception. They organized schools where women could receive an education and free clinics where they could receive health care and information. During the revolution abortion was legalized in the revolutionary zone. Centers were opened for women, including unmarried mothers and prostitutes.

Even though Stalinists (Communists) and Socialists in Spain betrayed the revolution and allowed the Fascists to win the war, the women who participated in Mujeres Libres maintain that it changed their lives forever. Their message that the Anarchist revolution must include the emancipation of women is carried forward by women and men in the Anarchist movement today who want to organize a new society where women and men are social equals, their differences are recognized and they can both cooperate with and mutually respect each other.

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