

## 17. PARIS 1913: THE SWAN SONG OF THE FRENCH FEMINISM

What does suffrage and eligibility mean to us, if all our privileges are restricted by special laws ... Protective labor legislation for women is treacherous! It might socially take back, what we have won politically.

Vera Hjelt, 1910

Inside the International Council of Women two international meetings were held close upon each other in Europe: a congress in Paris in 1913 and a congress connected to a quinquennial, a board meeting of ICW, in Rome in 1914. In Paris, this time a congress inside the ICW, the socialist feminist demand on equal labor legislation should still be supported. But this did not mean a change in the ICW's policy; only that French feminists still were defending their position. It was to be the last international manifestation by feminists for equality in the labor market before the First World War.

The debate was heated in Paris. But in Rome the following year, feminism in its pure or socialist form was hardly having any representatives. Motherhood with its ideology of difference was rule. The policy of the ICW, although never put in print, was to accept the gender division of labor and a protective legislation to conserve it.

The French activists, split up in smaller groups, had closed the ranks in a national cooperation by founding the Conseil National des femmes françaises (CNFF), joining the ICW in 1901. The more cautious part of the women's movement got the upper hand. To confirm the new consensus a congress was arranged by the National Council of French Women (CNFF) in Paris in 1913.<sup>1</sup> A bit odd since it was only four years since a ICW congress was held in Toronto. Madame Jules (Julie) Siegfried was the new president of CNFF after Sarah Monod.

---

<sup>1</sup> The congress was held the 2nd - 8th of June 1913, Mapp: Congrès 1913 - Paris Dos 44, BMD; *Dixième Congrès international des femmes. Œuvres et institutions féminines. Droits des femmes. Compte rendu des travaux. 1913*, par Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix, Secrétaire Générale du Congrès. Paris: Giard & Bière, 1914, later = Paris 1913; Lefauchaux 1966:243, 350; Klejman & Rochefort 1989:154ff.

Some French women were true to feminism and still demanded equality in the labor market. It led to excited discussions around the night work prohibition, now more than twenty years after its introduction as law in France. The umbrella organization, the French National Council, allowed resolutions at this international congress. A French democratic tradition was upheld which was not to be without complications.

The French minister of the interior proclaimed the congress in Paris opened in the grand amphitheater at the Sorbonne University. This shows that the Woman Question was publicly respected and accepted. The president of the ICW lady Isabel Aberdeen and its international secretary Dr Alice Salomon were among several speakers at the opening ceremony. Mme Jules Siegfried was the president of the congress and Avril de Sainte-Croix its general secretary.<sup>2</sup>

In a session on work, the effects of protective laws for women were treated. Introducer and referent was Louise Compain. She mentioned the Danish opposition to the night work prohibition for women, as well as the Swedish and Norwegian. When the prohibition was introduced in Sweden it had not been welcomed by "feminists" she said. Compain reminded the audience that French female printers had lost their jobs even if it still was allowed for women to fold the newspapers at nights in the editing houses.<sup>3</sup>

Alice Salomon and Constance Smith defended the protective legislation for women. Others were less definitive. A French factory inspector pointed to the "paradoxical" situation but said that she was positive to the legislation because of its advantages in the longer perspective. The defenders underlined that women's less favorable position in the labor market was not a direct consequence of the protective legislation. They said the reason for this was activities by male trade unions and the introduction of new machinery. That women had difficulties to unionize was stated as almost biologically built in to the female nature, and their nature was used as a defense for protective laws. Their household work and motherhood were, as always, lifted up as hindrances for

---

<sup>2</sup> The organizing committee had consisted of 60 women and an international committee of 36 women. Almost all were active in the ICW. The foreign minister M Pichon and the president Raymond Poincaré gave receptions for congress delegates. Speakers came from Australia, Belgium, England with Ireland, the Netherlands, India, Italy, Canada, Russia, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, USA, Austria. Paris 1913:6ff, 15ff, 33ff.

<sup>3</sup> "les féministes"(231), Paris 1913:226-238, 313; the countries without a night work prohibition were according to Compain, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Romania, Russia and the Baltic states and all of America. Paris 1913: 228. She was not quite right, at least some states in the USA had such regulations, see Kessler-Harris, Ch 7 1982 and 1995.

women as workers together with their lack of trade union activities.<sup>4</sup> These arguments were said to lead to the conclusion that women by protective legislation got help to fight for their rights. That was also often heard before, from socialists and activists in trade unions, both men and women.

The referent Louise Compain wished for her own part a stricter gender division of labor: works which demanded dexterity and ingenuity should be reserved for women. She welcomed state intervention in the labor market to separate work for women from work for men.<sup>5</sup> Behind her model is discerned the usual fear of disharmonious relations which might be the result if men and women were competing for the same work.

French Mme C Brunschvicg – active in Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes, the French suffrage organization – spoke about the need for an international law to forbid child work. The director of the International Association for Labor Legislation Stephan Bauer had personally told her why the night work prohibition for women had been easy to decide upon as an international convention; the support from the trade union movement had been decisive according to the director of the Berne Office, a person who should know it well. To forbid child labor was not that easy. The workers' trade unions did not want it forbidden, because boys were convenient as apprentices. Many adults (that is men) refused to do certain jobs, which the boys were used for. Such work was too dirty, difficult and demanded small bodies and fingers. As girls never were accepted as apprentices, the night work prohibition was never applied to working children. The convention with a night work prohibition for adult women had been easy because men got rid of competitors.<sup>6</sup> Children were needed as assistants.

Brunschvicg's revelation about how the syndical organizations had influenced the night work prohibition for women, confirmed accusations feminists had made aloud for a long time about trade unionists, such as Auguste Keufer. It confirmed what had been evident at congresses of the Second International, even if it was also said that the night work prohibition was the first step to more worker protection generally. Bauer thought that resistance to worker protection

---

<sup>4</sup> "Si paradoxal que cela puisse paraître ..." (234) Paris 1913:234f.

<sup>5</sup> "le plus d'adresse"(236) och "le plus d'ingéniosité"(236) Paris 1913:236f.

<sup>6</sup> Paris 1913: 238ff; letter fr Brunschvicg to Rutgers-Hoitsema, Vol 20, ALs Saml. SSA.

generally had diminished because of the Berne Convention of 1906. Child work might be next for a regulation internationally.

Cécile Brunschvicg defended protective laws with Social Darwinist arguments. She spoke about them as the best for humankind, a common way to put it when promoting legislation for women and children. The state should not harm the interests of the manufacturers "who in their hands hold a country's great power".<sup>7</sup> Internationalization was important as it would allow industries to compete on the same conditions. This was one of the official reasons for the Berne Convention. But at this congress the positive views Brunschvicg put forward in defense of unequal prohibition was not liked by a majority at the congress.

Still French feminists were vigilant, watching out for justice and equal conditions. That became crystal clear when Louise Compain put up her proposal for resolutions. The first of them was accepted without protests. It supported unionizing by and among women. The second proposal was for a new special legislation for women. Her resolution was similar to a convention under preparation at the International Association for Labor Legislation. It wanted a work week of 48 hours, but for women only and in jobs typical for women.<sup>8</sup>

Marguerite Durand immediately asked for a vote about the *principle* of special legislation, because feminist congresses in Paris earlier had decided *against* such legislations. Her demanded a resolution against all special legislation based on sex, which should made the one proposed by Compain impossible.<sup>9</sup> This was the beginning of a long and heated discussion filled with strong emotions. A dividing line went between equal treatment and special treatment; justice and equality was put against motherhood, family and the human race. Durand finished with rhetoric high points in which she, as feminists had done earlier, redefined "protective legislation" into "oppressive legislation". Compain and Durand quarreled about the significance of an increasing number of women in industries; Compain saw it as a proof that special legislation did not force women away from waged work while Durand pointed out the women were forced out of some work to be crowded together in

---

<sup>7</sup> "... des industriels qui tiennent entre leurs mains un des grandes forces du pays." Paris 1913:242.

<sup>8</sup> Paris 1913:493 ff, 510

<sup>9</sup> Paris 1913:510f, 519, see the resolution in text later.

others.<sup>10</sup> The first one spoke of numbers of women, the second of the gender division of labor.

The defenders wanted to look at the longer perspective, which was a standard in defense of special labor laws: dismissals at first were to be without importance in the long run. "(I)t is about the race, it is about the unborn children". Motherhood was always in focus when special laws were defended. In the group for prohibition, all were more or less influenced by the Social Darwinist view on motherhood, similar to the one that Ellen Key spoke up for; the view was also strong in the German women's movement.<sup>11</sup>

Maria Vérone, from the new generation of feminists in France, accentuated the principle of equality and discharged special legislation as unfair privileges. It had been said before, for example by Alexandra Gripenberg in Berlin. The arguments were repeated, on both sides:

From a feminist perspective, we demand equality, both when it comes to politics and when it comes to economy. We cannot on the same time demand equality and privileges, if so it is not equality any longer.<sup>12</sup>

Voting took place, first on the general resolution against all special legislations, formulated by Marguerite Durand. It was accepted but not unanimously. We recognize its content as socialist feminism:

Legislation, which regulate women's work should be abolished and replaced with a number of protective labor laws that are the same for the whole working population, irrespective of sex.<sup>13</sup>

Louise Compain, who felt the majority's opinion, reformulated her proposal to a resolution on a diminished working day so that no difference any longer depended on sex. It was accepted.<sup>14</sup> With this the congress once again supported the demand by the worker's movement for an eight hours day for all! It was already done at the feminist congress in Paris in 1900. But this time the form was less offensive, suggested that a shorter day should gradually be implemented. Radicalism was thinning out. But even if this was a congress

---

<sup>10</sup> "... des lois de protection..."(514) "...des lois d'oppression!..."(514), Paris 1913: 515f.

<sup>11</sup> Stoehr 1987; Melander 1994.

<sup>12</sup> " au point de vue féministe nous réclamons l'égalité, tant au point de vue politique qu'au point de vue économique, nous ne pouvons pas, en même temps, réclamer l'égalité et des privilèges, sans quoi ce ne serait plus l'égalité." Paris 1913:517; Klejman & Rochefort 1989:161f.

<sup>13</sup> "Que les lois d'exception qui régissent le travail des femmes soient abrogées et remplacées par l'application, à toute la population ouvrière et sans distinction de sexe, d'un régime égal de protection." Paris 1913:519, also 510f.

<sup>14</sup> Paris 1913: 519.

under the auspices of the ICW, it managed to hold on to the socialist feminist principle of equality: worker protection for all. But no unity ruled at this congress. The opposition had been clear, and supported by the referent of the congress.

As a matter of fact, there is no real reason in the context of a study on the night work prohibition to bring up the congress held in Rome in 1914. It is still here, to show how weak the defense for equality had become. Inside the ICW it was marginalized. The Quinquennial of the International Council of Women met in May. Right after that, the Italian National Council arranged a congress, which was considered badly organized but yet of importance for the self-esteem of Italian women.<sup>15</sup>

At an evening meeting open to the general public the theme was "the economic aspects for women's work". If at all, it was at this meeting that special legislation for women, especially the night work prohibition, should have been mentioned. But most speakers were eager to place the mother at home with her children.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs Creighton, president of the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland, started to talk about waged work. She wanted equal pay for equal work, organization of trade unions, a minimum wage and better education. She seemed almost to touch on work conditions and legislation. But instead, she too spoke about the special conditions of motherhood. The state ought to guarantee that a married women with children never had to work to earn money to support herself. Creighton recommended a kind of motherhood insurance, to take over the responsibility to provide from men, a radical proposal indeed. Children should be the responsibility of tax-payers, not of individual men. Women were to be paid by the state to raise their children. Radical but also heard before, for example in Paris by Anna Yon Lampérière in 1900. The reason for this was, according to Creighton, that women would not ever be able to work on men's

---

<sup>15</sup> Quinquennial 6th-16th of May 1914 and congress 14th -20 of May (16th - 23rd May) 1914, "Congrès International, organisé par le Conseil National des Femmes Italiennes, Rome 14-20 Mai 1914", program page and "Congrès International des Femmes, Rome 16-23 1914, Programme et Règlement du Congrès, Palais des Beaux Arts, Valle Giulia" 13p Film 82-325 5, HLA, LaB; *Congresso Internazionale Femminile – Roma*, no year; International Council of Women *5th quinquennial meeting, Rome 1914*, edited by the Countess of Aberdeen, President. Karlsruhe, 1914, later = ICW Rome 1914; *FBw* 1914 (15/6):89.

<sup>16</sup> ICW Rome 1914 Content:VIIIff; *Congresso Internazionale Femminile*, 1914; Zepler 1914:934; "Meeting on Economic Aspects of Women's Work" Wednesday, May 13<sup>th</sup> 1914, ICW Rome 1914: 287-302.

conditions, because they were to marry and have children. It was a vision, founded on the wish that every woman should have a husband and a good home because "the profession of wife and mother /is/ not only the noblest but the happiest profession for any woman".<sup>17</sup> Despite the fact that her contribution started off about the labor market, it quickly landed with the woman in the family as mother.

This was said in a time when many working women were without a husband, others could not as married stay at home, if the children were to be fed. Such conditions were disregarded. Gertrud Bäumer, Germany, was trying a similar idea; the housewife's work had to be given more appreciation and be compensated with money, although she was aware of that it would not be possible to pay for it to its full value. And who should pay her?

Mme Duchêne from France was not focusing on motherhood when she raised the question of equal pay for equal work. Different works for men and for women did not really give a good enough explanation to their differing wages. Her recommendation was better education and mixed trade unions, to stand side by side with men.<sup>18</sup>

Norwegian Gina Krog, since long an activist and journalist for women's emancipation in her homeland, a liberal and leader of the National Norwegian Council of Women founded in 1904, raised the criticism of special protective laws for women:

Let us revise the laws men have made for women, even when they have given the word 'protection' as a title. Many women in our northern countries see a danger in several of these protective laws.<sup>19</sup>

Gina Krog also told that Nordic women, this time even those from Iceland, were to meet in Copenhagen to discuss the negative consequences for protective legislation for women. The Nordic resistance was not finished.

The reverend Anna Howard Shaw spoke about the relation between suffrage and economy. She was president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Unfortunately, her contribution was not printed. She had the habit of speaking freely,<sup>20</sup> as so many US American women. Belatedly the suffrage had become important and seriously considered by the ICW, since some

---

<sup>17</sup> ICW Rome 1914:289.

<sup>18</sup> ICW Rome 1914:294.

<sup>19</sup> ICW Rome 1914:296.

<sup>20</sup> Not printed, but mentioned as "Suffrage and Economics", ICW Rome 1914: 300ff; Linkugel und Solomon 1991:62.

countries already had given women the right to vote. The real challenge was that in some countries a so called general suffrage had been decided upon, including all men but yet excluding women. Sweden was such a case. That was the opposite of the earlier demand by some feminists, that women should get the vote on the same premises as men, even if some men were excluded. This was a real affront to women and to feminists especially.

In the ICW, this conservative and cautious organization, a positive view of protective legislation for women was well imbedded. Suffrage came late on its agenda. Together this shows the attitude to woman emancipation in this prudent international woman organization.<sup>21</sup> Equality was asked for only in politics, and not until it was on the way of becoming a reality. And the reassurances were many, that the gender division of labor was going to stay complementary. Suffrage for women should not alter it. Many men, as well as women, did not imagine that women in any larger numbers were to become politicians if they got the right to vote; they were only going to vote but not come forward to be elected. Women were expected to vote for men, as their husbands. The arena of politics was, in the imagined world where a gender division of work was held in the highest esteem, men's work, an arena in which men had a natural competence.

---

<sup>21</sup> For example *FBw* 1913:89 about the impossible task to keep suffrage away from the congress in Rome.