

Bread and Roses or “Mimose”?

Laura E. Ruberto (March 08, 2008)



1940 - Le mondine scese in sciopero generale con tutti i braccianti d'Italia, con la solidarietà degli operai e dei contadini riescono a imporre — dopo 37 giorni di eroica lotta — per la prima volta nella storia del movimento contadino internazionale, un contratto nazionale per gli operai agricoli. Mondina! nell'unità sta il segreto di ogni vittoria!

Where has over 100 years of honoring women gotten us?



Today is March 8, International Women’s Day. In much of the world, today is a day to celebrate and honor women workers, women’s struggles, and women’s lives. It is a day generally used to renew global calls to action for a variety of political struggles. The holiday is all but forgotten in the U.S., where it is traditionally symbolized by “bread and roses”; in Italy, where women are given mimose (acacia flowers), the day has become rather commercialized.

What’s unfortunate is that women continue to be second-class citizens under the law, in the U.S. and abroad. I’m thinking about very concrete realities, such as the U.S.’s woefully inadequate family leave act and Italy’s retrograde fertility laws. In the U.S., for instance, we lack appropriate parental leave and childcare options for families—insufficiencies that affect the working class, especially women of color, most of all. Even in the privileged space of academia, women continue to be secondary to their male counterparts at all levels—a point that’s particularly disturbing considering how much current academic discourse focuses on differentiations in power and identity.

The history of International Women’s Day is a beautiful narrative—evoking immigrant women workers’ strikes and labor actions —and one which should not be forgotten. The day was celebrated as early as 1895, but it wasn’t until the early twentieth century that it came to be consistently celebrated on March 8, commemorating a number of events, including the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, where over 140 women lost their lives, including many Italian immigrants.

While I’m all for getting flowers today, I’d rather see men and women working together in practical, concrete ways to support and implement changes that demonstrate a real commitment to equality and access.

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