

Commentary on 'Protect our children': The elephant in the room

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Clara or Klara Zetkin (1857–1933), one of the most distinguished woman socialist revolutionaries of her time, if remembered at all, is probably best known as the instigator of International Women's Day, 8 March. Inspired by demonstrations for improved working conditions and women's suffrage in the USA, International Women's Day was first honoured in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland in 1911. Originally envisioned as a day for the recognition of and struggle for women's economic, social and political rights,^{1–3} it tends now to be marked either in the breach, or by charities, celebrities and business leaders.² Although Zetkin urged women to fight for the vote and rights to work, equal pay, paid maternity leave, free child care, and education, her main concern was the primacy of the class struggle. Unlike bourgeois feminists whose fight for suffrage and equality was against the men of their own class, for her it was vital that working class women join with the men of their class to overthrow the capitalist system that exploited them both.⁴

The first three paragraphs from 'Protect our children', reprinted above, are a forceful indictment of the capitalist system.⁵ Its most important and prescient line, 'Capitalism pounces upon the proletarian child that is already threatened and damaged prenatally by the ruthless exploitation of its father and mother', recognizes the intergenerational transmission of the effects of poverty via prenatal influences on child health. Zetkin was by no means the first to recognize intergenerational effects. William Buchan in 1790 warned that marriage to 'a woman of sickly constitution, and descended of unhealthy parents' would turn the home into an infirmary,⁶ and examples of the effects of intergenerational deprivation were common in the works of authors and illustrators of the time. However, it was not until towards the end of the 20th century and the adoption of the life course approach and, more recently still, epigenetics, that intergenerational effects on health of environmental exposures have been studied systematically in epidemiology.^{7–9} Even now, despite a plethora of birth

cohorts, the Southampton Women's Survey remains the only cohort in Europe to have recruited women exclusively and explicitly before conception,¹⁰ and hardly any studies include more than two generations.

Originally from a middle class family, Zetkin was no stranger to poverty. In 1878 all socialist activity was banned in Germany and, after a period of illegal activism, Zetkin left for Austria, then Switzerland, before going into exile to join her partner, Ossip Zetkin, in Paris in 1882. Socialists in exile had difficulty finding employment and the Zetkin family were forced to live in great poverty. In 1885 they were thrown out of their lodgings and their few possessions confiscated for failure to pay the rent. By 1886 Clara Zetkin had contracted tuberculosis and in 1889 Ossip Zetkin died of spinal tuberculosis, leaving Clara Zetkin a single mother of two at the age of 32.³

Over the past 50 years a legion of studies have documented socioeconomic inequalities in health in almost every part of the world. More recent decades have also seen commissions at national and international levels aimed at tackling these inequalities.^{11,12} Recommendations, where they have moved beyond motherhood and apple pie, have rarely proposed more than piecemeal modifications of the existing system, and in the remainder of 'Protect our children' Zetkin picks apart the 'ridiculously inconsequential' child protection measures of her time, mainly those introduced by Bismarck.⁵ Few recommendations then or now have been as bold as those of Zetkin, who unashamedly identified capitalism as the underlying cause of multigenerational deprivation, and advocated its replacement by socialism as the solution. Such proclamations can be easily dismissed as political rants (Zetkin represented the German Communist Party in the Reichstag from 1920 to 1933), but Zetkin was not afraid of presenting truth to power. In August 1932, as its oldest member, tradition dictated that she open the first parliamentary session of the newly elected Reichstag. Now 75 and in very poor health, she travelled to Berlin from Moscow and was

brought into the Reichstag by stretcher to deliver a blistering attack on capitalism, fascism and the newly dominant Nazi party.¹³ For German-speaking readers, a recording of part of Clara Zetkin's speech to the Reichstag is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jrBSkN8BLE]. In March 1933, immediately after the Reichstag fire, the Communist Party was banned and Clara Zetkin died 3 months later in exile in Moscow.^{3,4}

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