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## The “True” Origins of March 8, International Women’s Day

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**I***nternational Women’s Day* is generally thought to be of American origin and to commemorate demonstrations or strikes by women that reportedly took place in New York in 1857 and 1908. However, despite extensive research, historians have been unable to find any references to such events in American documents of the day.

Is March 8 just a myth then? No, because *International Women’s Day* does in fact trace its roots back to historical events.

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### The First Official Woman’s Day

*International Women’s Day* traces its origins back to an official demonstration called Woman’s Day. Organized by the National Woman’s Committee of the American Socialist Party, the demonstration in support of women’s suffrage was held the last Sunday in February 1909.

In a proposal sent to local chapters, the party executive recommended they set aside the last Sunday in February 1909 for a demonstration in support of women’s right to vote and to put the issue of women’s suffrage on their agendas.

On February 28, at least five women’s suffrage “meetings” took place in the New York City area. They were called Woman’s Suffrage Demonstrations or Woman’s Suffrage Meetings. However, advertisements never used the expression “Woman’s Day.” Advertisements and newspaper reports from the time indicate that the “meetings” focused mainly on women’s suffrage and the fight for socialism. Other women’s issues, although not totally ignored, appeared to have been less important.

It seems, however, that the first “true” March 8 did not take place on February 28, 1909, but rather on March 3, 1908, in Chicago. In the absence of Arthur M. Lewis, the regular Sunday orator of the American socialist movement, the two most experienced women speakers in the movement, Gertrude Breslau-Hunt and May Wood-Simons, took to the podium to denounce the exploitation of underpaid women workers who did not have the right to vote and who were deprived of their most basic rights.

### As For The Famous Strike...

A needle trade strike did take place from November 22, 1909, to February 15, 1910, when between 20,000 and 30,000 workers — 80% of them women — walked off the job in New York City. The work stoppage was referred to as the “women’s movement strike,” because of the strong perception that it was rooted more in the women’s movement than the labor movement.

### The Internationalization of Woman’s Day

Woman’s Day officially became *International Women’s Day* at the Second Congress of the Socialist International in Copenhagen, Denmark, in August 1910. German Clara Zetkin, head of the International Movement of Socialist Women in Europe, was responsible for spearheading the resolution. According to the text of the resolution, the goal of *International Women’s Day* was to promote the fight for women’s suffrage.

In 1911, *International Women’s Day* was celebrated in style for the first time in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Switzerland and the United States. However, it was not until 1914 that women all over Europe celebrated March 8... on March 8!

### March 8 in Québec

Here at home, sources make no mention of any major demonstrations linked to *International Women’s Day* prior to 1971. On March 9, 1971, in a Québec caught up in the throes of sweeping change, the *Front de libération des femmes* officially launched a province-wide campaign demanding free abortions on demand. The launch was marked by a march and a meeting on the subject in Montréal.

Women’s groups, unions and community organizations subsequently contributed to making *International Women’s Day* an annual event, as it was elsewhere around the world. Every year on March 8, the public’s attention is turned to women’s social and economic demands in a day of reflection, discussion, and action.

### From Yesterday to Today

It took several decades for America’s Woman’s Day to evolve into *International Women’s Day*. The vision, discourse and actions of feminists have evolved over time with women in all societies, but the goal has remained unchanged—fighting for the legitimate rights of women.

And as Adrienne Rich remarked with regard to the “forgotten” feminist origins of *International Women’s Day*, “à the disappearance of the historical and political past of women means that each new generation of feminists appears as an abnormal outgrowth of history.”

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