

**Document 13: Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland, "Letter to the Convention of the Women of America," 15 June 1851, in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. 1, 1848-1861* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881), pp. 234-37. Reprinted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, eds., *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, Volume I, 1750-1880* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), pp. 287-290.**

## Introduction

In 1851 Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland, members of the central committee of the *Association Fraternelle et Solidaire de toutes les Associations* (Federation of Fraternal and Mutual Aid Associations), were imprisoned for six months for political conspiracy in the Saint Lazare women's prison in Paris for violating the proscription against women's political activism. There they wrote letters to leading political persons and groups, including this one to the women's rights convention at Worcester, Massachusetts.

Dear Sisters:--Your courageous declaration of Woman's Rights has resounded even to our prison, and has filled our souls with inexpressible joy.

In France the reaction has suppressed the cry of liberty of the women of the future. Deprived, like their brothers, of the Democracy, of the right to civil and political equality, and the fiscal laws which trammel the liberty of the press, hinder the propagation of those eternal truths which must regenerate humanity.

They wish the women of France to found a hospitable tribunal, which shall receive the cry of the oppressed and suffering, and vindicate in the name of humanity, solidarity, the social right for both sexes equally; and where woman, the mother of humanity, may claim in the name of her children, mutilated by tyranny, her right to true liberty, to the complete development and free exercise of all her faculties, and reveal that half of truth which is in her, and without which no social work can be complete.

The darkness of reaction has obscured the sun of 1848, which seemed to rise so radiantly. Why? Because the revolutionary tempest, in overturning at the same time the throne and the scaffold, in breaking the chain of the black slave, forgot to break the chain of the most oppressed of all the pariahs of humanity.

"There shall be no more slaves," said our bretheren. "We proclaim universal suffrage. All shall have the right to elect the agents who shall carry out the Constitution which should be based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Let each one come and deposit his vote; the barrier of privilege is overturned; before the electoral urn there are no more oppressed, no more masters

and slaves."

Woman, in listening to this appeal, rises and approaches the liberating urn to exercise her right of suffrage as a member of society. But the barrier of privilege rises also before her. "You must wait," they say. But by this claim alone woman affirms the right, not yet recognized, of the half of humanity--the right of woman to liberty, equality, and fraternity. She obliges man to verify the fatal attack which he makes on the integrity of his principles.

Soon, in fact during the wonderful days of June, 1848, liberty glides from her pedestal in the flood of the victims of the reaction; based on the "right of the strongest," she falls, overturned in the name of the "the right of the strongest."

The Assembly kept silence in regard to the right of one-half of humanity, for which only one of its members raised his voice, but in vain. No mention was made of the right of woman in a Constitution framed in the name of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

It is in the name of these principles that woman comes to claim her right to take part in the Legislative Assembly, and to help to form the laws which must govern society, of which she is a member.

She comes to demand of the electors the consecration of the principle of equality by the election of a woman, and by this act she obliges man to prove that the fundamental law which he has formed in the sole name of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is still based upon privilege, and soon privilege triumphs over this phantom of universal suffrage, which, being but half of itself, sinks on the 31st of May, 1850.

But while those selected by the half of the people--by men alone--evoke force to stifle liberty, and forge restrictive laws to establish order by compression, woman, guided by fraternity, foreseeing incessant struggle, and in the hope of putting an end to them, makes an appeal to the laborer to found liberty and equality on fraternal solidarity. The participation of woman gave to this work of enfranchisement an eminently pacific character, and the laborer recognizes the right of woman, his companion in labor.

The delegates of a hundred and four associations, united, without distinction of sex, elected two women, with several of their brethren, to participate equally with them in the administration of the interests of labor, and in the organization of the work of solidarity.

Fraternal associations were formed with the object of enfranchising the laborer from the yoke of spoilage and patronage, but, isolated in the midst of the Old World, their efforts could only produce a feeble amelioration for themselves.

The union of associations based on fraternal solidarity had for its end the organization of labor; that is to say, an equal division of labor, of instruments, and of the products of labor.

The means were, the union of labor, and of credit among the workers of all professions, in order to acquire the instruments of labor and the necessary materials, and to form a mutual guarantee for the education of their children, and to provide for the needs of the old, the sick, and the infirm.

In this organization all the workers, without distinction of sex or profession, having an equal right to election, and being eligible for all functions, and all having equally the initiative and the sovereign decision in the acts of common interests, they laid the foundation of a new society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

It is in the name of law framed by man only--by those elected by privilege--that the Old World, wishing to stifle in the germ the holy work of pacific enfranchisement, has shut up within the walls of a prison those who had founded it--those elected by the laborers.

But the impulse has been given, a grand act has been accomplished. The right of woman has been recognized by the laborers, and they have consecrated that right by the election of those who had claimed it in vain for both sexes, before the electoral urn and before and electoral committees. They have received the true civil baptism, were elected by the laborers to accomplish the mission of enfranchisement, and after having shared their rights and their duties, they share to-day their captivity.

It is from the depths of their prison that they address to you the relation of these facts, which contain in themselves high instruction. It is by labor, it is by entering resolutely into the ranks of the working people, that women will conquer the civil and political equality on which depends the happiness of the world. As to moral equality, has she not conquered it by the power of sentiment? It is, therefore, by the sentiment of the love of humanity that the mother of humanity will find power to accomplish her high mission. It is when she shall have well comprehended the holy law of solidarity--which is not an obscure and mysterious dogma, but a living providential fact--that the kingdom of God promised by Jesus, and which is no other than the kingdom of equality and justice, shall be realized on earth.

Sisters of America! your socialist sisters of France are united with you in the vindication of the right of woman to civil and political equality. We have, moreover, the profound conviction that only by the power of association based on solidarity--by the union of the working-classes of both sexes to organize labor--can be acquired, completely and pacifically, the civil and political equality of woman, and the social right for all.

It is in this confidence that, from the depths of the jail which still imprisons our bodies without reaching our hearts, we cry to you, Faith, Love, Hope, and send to you our sisterly salutations.

Jeanne Deroin,

Pauline Roland