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EDITORIAL *Martin Levy*

SISTERHOOD, SOCIALISM AND STRUGGLE

Mary Davis Sonia Andermahr Charlie Weinberg Mollie Brown Kellie O'Dowd Pragna Patel Lauren Conway Helen O'Connor Sarah Woolley Socorro Gomes Liz Rowley Jenny Schreiner Amy Field Heather Wakefield Lauren Collins Annette Mansell-Green Lydia Samarbakhsh

SOUL FOOD **POETRY AND THE WORK OF SOLIDARITY** *Fran Lock*

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Cover image by R Suryaninov, 1963 is from a Womens' International Democratic Federation poster from the 1960s celebrating the struggle of women for peace and liberation

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MARTIN LEVY
EDITORIAL

26 September 2021

This edition of *Communist Review* is devoted almost entirely to the invited contributions to the Communist Party's conference, 'Sisterhood, socialism and struggle', which was held as a webinar on Saturday 8 May this year. As Mary Davis pointed out in her book *Women & Class* and in her contribution to the conference:

> "The super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is a fundamental prerequisite for the operation of capitalism – economically, politically and ideologically."[1]

The conference aimed "to put women's liberation at the heart of class struggle and explore how we should respond to the intensification of women's oppression under modern capitalism." In her opening remarks, the Party's women's organiser, Carol Stavris, said:

"The fight for women's rights is a constant struggle. Our Party understands the Women Question in capitalist society, and how our fight for liberation is integral to attaining a sustainable, non-exploitative alternative. We have developed policies and strategy for the struggles ahead, and we are calling on all our sisters, in their community groups, environmental campaigns, and the labour and progressive movements in Britain, to join the fight with us. We listen to our international sisters in the fight for their rights, and for their lives, and we stand with them. Here are some of the challenges:

- *One in three women around the world have experienced violence; globally 243 million women and girls have been subjected to sexual or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the last 12 months.*
- *650 million women across the globe were married before the age of 18.*
- *More than 200 million women and girls in 30 countries have undergone female genital mutilation.*
- *More than 70% of all human trafficking involves women and girls, mainly for sexual exploitation.*
- *One in five female refugees have experienced sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking as they flee countries affected by war.*

We know what the capitalist system, reinforced by gender stereotypes of a patriarchal society does to women – it is our lived experience every day. Modern capitalism is intensifying our oppression. Vivienne Hayes, chief executive of the Women's Resource Centre, sums up the current period as 'arguably the most challenging time for women's rights in living memory'. In Britain:

- *Women and girls are generally earning less and saving less; they are in insecure jobs or living close to poverty.*
- *Care jobs, which are mainly done by women, are less well paid in relation to other sectors.*
- *Unpaid care work is on the increase; in the home, women do the bulk of care work, but both paid and unpaid care is vital to life and to the economy.*
- *Sex-based violence has risen; many women are being forced to lock down at home with their abusers, while services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible.*
- *The pandemic has just made life worse for many women; they are much more likely to suffer from depressive illnesses than men, because of the lockdowns.*
- *What will work look like in the future, and how will women workers be affected?*

We fight for change. We know that policy-making that doesn't involve women or include them in decision-making is less effective and can even do harm. This conference is our call to action. We have to step up our fight to defend women's rights, women's spaces and women's services enshrined in law. To do this we have to:

- *build a united feminist movement – sisterhood;*
- *have a vision and a goal to work towards a system that will hear our voices – socialism;*
- *struggle for that vision and goal, which will give us hope.*

Sisterhood, socialism and struggle! "

Beginning with a Marxist-feminist analysis of the roots of women's oppression, the conference continued with panels based upon the three strands of the *Charter for Women*, ie women in society, at work, and in the labour movement. Such questions as the feminisation of poverty, unfair job segregation and the erosion of women's sex-based rights were highlighted, with calls for urgent change to secure equal pay and access to decent childcare. The role of women in the fight for climate justice was also profiled.

As internationalists, Communists recognise that the fight against women's oppression is worldwide and so the conference was joined by Communist women leaders from Canada, South Africa and Brazil. There should have been a fourth: Annie Raja, a member of the National Executive of the Communist Party of India, general secretary of the National Federation of Indian Women, and vice-president of the Women's International Democratic Federation. Unfortunately, Annie was forced to withdraw, due to having had Covid and also to having suffered three close family bereavements. The conference sent condolences and best wishes to Annie and her family.

Recognising the importance of learning from, and gaining inspiration from, past struggles, the conference concluded with a presentation on the role of women in the Paris Commune, whose 150th anniversary is this year.

The theme of "sisterhood, socialism and struggle" has also been adopted by Fran Lock for her **Soul Food** column, which rounds off this edition of *Communist Review*.

Notes and References

1 M Davis, *Women & Class*, 4th edition, Manifesto Press, London, 2020, p vi.
2 Initiated by the Communist Party and in 2020 adopted by the National Assembly of Women; see *ibid*, pp 66-7.

"The key to understanding the situation of women under capitalism lies in the relationship between exploitation and oppression. Oppression is linked materially to the process of class exploitation, as well as operating at what you might call a superstructural level through oppressive ideologies – sexism and racism – which serve to maintain class rule by dividing the exploited. Oppression and therefore super-exploitation operate at the material and ideological levels." **Mary Davis**

SISTERHOOD, SOCIALISM AND STRUGGLE

"The overthrow of mother-right was the world-historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children."

Engels *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*

THE ROOTS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

The Marxist View

Mary Davis

We start with theory, but why do we need it and why do we need to understand women's oppression?

Well, because theory is linked to practice: in other words, we have to understand the world in order to change it – and we certainly want to change it. However, it is not just any theory: we in the Communist Party offer a Marxist feminist theory, we say that it is the only theory that really can explain our oppression and super exploitation. Sonya Andermahr, the next speaker, will show the inadequacy of many of the other theories.

Much needs to change for women, but **there can be no change for women without women**. The rest of the conference will discuss this, and Charlie Weinberg will be talking about the *Charter for Women*.

We assert straight away that there is a link between women and class, and hence this is the foundation of our practice.

Women's oppression began with the emergence of class society. Class exploitation and the oppression of women appeared at the same time in history, because of their common origin in the development of private property. The accumulation of wealth under private ownership was the material basis for the establishment of class society, and therefore the material basis for the oppression of women by the men who controlled that wealth.

The ways in which different forms of class society – slavery, feudalism and capitalism – have oppressed women have assumed various historical forms, as has the precise nature of class exploitation; but the important point to emphasise is that the basis of women's oppression is class exploitation. Women have been oppressed in all forms of class society, due to the conflict between the twofold nature of production. I want to talk a bit about this, because it is a very, very important contribution that Marx and Engels made to our understanding of history. As Engels said:

> "According to the materialist conception of history, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is again of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the implements required for this; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species [this is women's job, due to women's biology –*MD*]. The social organisation, under which people of a definite historical epoch and of a definite country live are determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand, and of the family, on the other."[1]

Now this is extremely important, because this twofold nature of production really is the key to understanding women's oppression. Throughout recorded history, the denial of women's rights has been justified by patriarchal ideologies of one form or another. This is most nakedly apparent under capitalism, on which I am going to concentrate, because **the super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is fundamental to the maintenance of capitalism** – economically, politically and ideologically.

The key to understanding the situation of women under capitalism lies in **the relationship between exploitation and oppression**. Oppression is linked materially to the process of class exploitation, as well as operating at what you might call a superstructural level through **oppressive ideologies** – sexism and racism – which serve to maintain class rule by dividing the exploited. Oppression and therefore super exploitation operate at the material and ideological levels.

At the material level we have, very clearly, low wages and job segregation, which are reproduced as the norm when women sell their labour power. All indices of wage rates nationally and internationally show that the average wages of women are always lower than those of white males. This fact of super-exploitation benefits capitalism by increasing surplus value and therefore the rate of profit.

Now, obviously in capitalist society all workers are exploited but women are super-exploited, because of their low wages. Why does this happen? Because unequal pay, job segregation and part-time work for women are caused fundamentally by the conflict between work and home: by women's role in social production outside the home, but their role in domestic production inside the home. This is the big contradiction for women workers which capitalism exploits.

At the ideological level, oppression is the most important means of maintaining the class relations which support class exploitation. Capitalism can only be maintained by dividing workers on the most easily identifiably basis – biological sex and skin colour – hence the oppressive ideologies of sexism and racism. For women the ideology of oppression is patriarchy, sexism and misogyny. Therefore:

- the fundamental principle underlying the Marxist analysis of 'the woman question' is that the oppression of women is rooted in class society, hence the link between women and class;
- Communists recognise that the oppression of women and of Black people is fundamental to the maintenance of class society; and
- the struggle to overcome that oppression is central to the class struggle, to the extent that the latter cannot be successful without the former.

However, we now face a major challenge because women's rights and protections, fought for and won through struggles over the last two centuries, are facing sustained and serious ideological attack. This has been the result of the growth and ascendancy of neoliberalism and its accompanying ideological attack on collective identity and unified class struggle.

The essence of this is the new widely accepted ideology which conflates sex and gender. It is vital that our Marxist theory is robust enough to challenge this new and divisive ideology – and actually policy capture – which seeks to relegate women's biological existence to a mere preferred identity. This is a very, very serious attack on our very species-being.

The road to socialism will be unattainable without an understanding of the link between women's oppression and class exploitation. A regenerated women's movement is a vital core element in the struggle for socialism. The building of a broad-based women's movement and a strengthened labour movement which rejects capitalist ideology must go hand in hand. But without a robust renewal of Marxist feminist theory, which challenges patriarchal and other divisive ideologies, such a project will remain a distant vision.

Socialism provides the only means by which capitalist class exploitation can be ended. Thus women's liberation can only be achieved in socialist system of society. The price of our liberation is eternal vigilance in defending our theory and practice: we must dare to struggle and dare to win – WOMEN's LIBERATION and SOCIALISM.

Notes and references

1 Engels, First Preface to *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*; in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 26, pp 131-2.

Rival feminist theories

Sonya Andermahr

Today there are several competing theories of the reasons for women's continued inequality and oppression, and different views on how to end it. My talk will consider some of these rival theories, focussing on the challenges posed to feminist activism, socialist unity and class struggle by identity politics and other political discourses based in neoliberal ideologies and idealist philosophies. Their limitations demonstrate the pressing need for a systematic materialist analysis of women's oppression from the perspective of Marxist feminism if we are to make progress.

Alongside the general retreat from class politics in recent years, there has been a positive resurgence of feminist activism as evidenced by movements such as #MeToo, the global Feminist Strike, and Reclaim These Streets, in response to shocking levels of violence against women at all levels of society. While this is to be welcomed, we do need to pause and ask what kind of feminism is being mobilised; what is its relation to class struggle, and is it actually capable of confronting and challenging women's oppression in capitalist society?

Liberal feminism emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to contest biological determinism and to challenge (mainly bourgeois) women's exclusion from the public sphere and their lack of political and legal rights. Liberal feminists are right to argue that gender is socially constructed and to challenge sex-role stereotypes. However, as Marxist feminists argue, the emphasis on legal rights and professional advancement of women ignores the existence of class exploitation and the specific situation of working-class and Black women to the detriment of the women's movement. Historically, the neglect of class has led liberal feminists to put the interests of bourgeois women above those of the working class. In addition, while women may be granted formal rights, the majority are still concentrated in low-paid jobs and burdened by domestic labour and the social responsibility for child and elder care. They are also, regardless of class, subject to sexism and male violence.

Radical feminism emerged in the second wave of feminism, in reaction to the limited goals of liberal feminism; and it focuses on those aspects of sexual politics frequently ignored both by the state and the left, most notably male violence against women and girls. Given the lack of progress in this area over the last several decades, it is not surprising that radical feminism is currently experiencing a resurgence. In common with Marxist feminists, radical feminists recognise how sexist ideology reinforces women's subordinate status in class society. It should be acknowledged that radical feminists are among those on the frontline fighting violence against women and girls and for the provision and defence of single-sex women's services, refuges and shelters. Marxist feminists stand alongside their radical feminist sisters on this front. Where we depart from radical feminism is in the analysis of male domination and female subordination. Problematically, from a Marxist perspective, radical feminism identifies the conflict between men and women as preceding and transcending class- and race-conflict, and it isn't clear what the solution to male domination of women should be, other than permanent separatism.

In claiming to go beyond Marxist analysis, as feminists such as Mary Daly and Dale Spender do, radical feminism becomes ahistorical and paradoxically risks affirming the very biological determinism it set out to challenge. Radical feminism's insistence on an ongoing, if not eternal, antagonism between men and women downplays the class exploitation and class solidarity that working-class women share with men of their class. This position inevitably works to alienate the vast majority of women, whose subordination stems from their exploitation and oppression in capitalist society.

In recent years liberal feminism, the only current to have gained mainstream traction in capitalism, has morphed into a number of new discourses, which have appealed to many on the left, including many socialists and even some Marxists, with troubling results. These theories, based in liberal individualism and identitarianism, while superficially attractive to many on the left, are in fact complicit with bourgeois ideology and easily accommodated by capitalist societies. They include the major forms of identity politics such as *'choice' feminism, intersectional feminism* and gender identity theory – as well as diversity theory, now the dominant ideology of organisations.

Where have these theories come from? Marxists argue that, faced with the threat from communism in the post-war period, the capitalist world developed new Cold War ideologies to accompany its neoimperialist expansion into new global markets. By the 1980s, this resulted in the emergence of neoliberalism as an overarching ideology of market deregulation and financialisation, and the promotion of the individual as the primary unit of society. At the same time, a loss of faith in revolutionary politics in the US and Western Europe and the collapse of the socialist societies in Eastern Europe led to a disenchantment with universalist enlightenment philosophies. These have been replaced with fragmented, mini-narratives focused on 'cultural' identities and individual rights that have come to be known as identity politics.

The hegemony of identity politics and its underlying idealist philosophy among not only mainstream political parties and the media establishment, but also parts of the labour movement, is very concerning. As promoted by socialists and even some Marxists, it represents a total misrepresentation of Marx's thought. As a materialist thinker Marx acknowledges that men and women are part of the material world, and he speaks in *Capital* Vol 1 of the "everlasting nature-imposed condition of existence".[1] Marx theorised the condition of alienation under capitalism, which severs men and women from their human species-being. His conception is completely at odds with the contemporary postmodern repression of the natural or material body, which seeks to dissolve the latter into culture. As Terry Eagleton puts it: "All attention to our common biology becomes the thought crime of 'biologism'".[2]

The consequence of this is far-reaching for that half of humanity responsible for reproduction and whose oppression in class society is based on biological sex: it undermines both women's collective identity and unified class struggle. For example, in advancing a theory of individual choice, gender identity theory substitutes what amounts to sex-role stereotypes for the material reality of sex. Women's sexed bodies, the very basis of their oppression in class society, are ignored in the pursuit of individual rights based on gender expression. In the debate around self-identification, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are erroneously conflated, meaning that many people fail to understand that challenging the specific discrimination faced by, for example, trans people is not served by undermining resistance to the centuries-old oppression of women as a biological sex.

A related problem is that large parts of today's feminist movement have developed their politics in a university environment in which liberal individualism is the dominant ideology, and in consequence they often fail to grasp the fact that most women are workers and therefore central to the class struggle. Many of these middle-class student activists seek to reform capitalism so that it is marginally better for women and minorities, rather than overturn it and end inequality for all. The majority of today's 'radical' bourgeois commentators share a similar background and approach. One example is the journalist and author Laurie Penny who recently wrote an article denying the specific material basis of women's oppression and lamenting the prevalence of so-called TERFs in Britain.[3] This article was shared widely and approvingly by socialists on left-wing social media.

As recent debates about so-called 'sex work' attest, this 'radical' branch of liberal feminism has for some time sought to reclaim pornography and prostitution in the name of liberating women. Two left-wing groups, Momentum and Novaro Media, both recently promoted the pro-sex work 'Decrim Now' campaign, transmitting the message to their young followers that commodification of women's bodies is empowering, and completely dismissing years of radical feminist and Communist campaigning in opposition to prostitution. As Morgan Horn recently argued in the *Morning Star:*

> "We must be absolutely clear that the sexualisation of women places men in a position of superiority. It divides the working class and distracts us from class struggle."[4]

Another problematic yet hugely influential contemporary theory posing as a solution to inequality is *intersectional feminism*. The phrase 'intersectional feminism' is ubiquitous, both in academia and in political activism; for example in the protests following the murder of Sarah Everard. The campaign group set up to challenge male violence against women, Reclaim These Streets, uses it all the time, as in the meme "my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit", but what does it mean and what effect does it have on women's ability to mobilise across class and race lines?

Intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the way in which different oppressions, namely sex and race, interact with each other and thereby seek to overcome the fragmentation of social justice movements.[5] According to Crenshaw's theory, intersectionality refers to the interrelationship in black women's lives of structures of sex-based and racial oppression. At its best, it offers a nuanced and detailed analysis of the ways in which sex and race intersect in black women's lives in capitalist societies.

However, as Feyzi Ismail argues, intersectionality as a theory tends to see the interrelation between oppressions in a formal and descriptive way rather than analysing how oppression interacts with class exploitation.[6] Under the influence of postmodernism, it has increasingly been used to account for an ever-growing list of subjectively experienced cultural identities and therefore is incapable of grasping the objective and systemic character of class exploitation and sex- and race-oppression.

In this version, intersectional feminism tends to pile up a wealth of identities, one of which may be class, which vie for significance and visibility, yet aren't in fact equally weighted. For example, in many contemporary campaigns and debates, gender identity and gendered language are given as much prominence as such issues as violence against women and women's exploited labour and poverty. Intersectional feminism's commitment to politics based on cultural identities means that class politics is ultimately occluded. We are left with a sense of fragmentation – of identities, positions, attitudes with no clear sense of how the various parts relate to the whole.

Campaigns in which intersectional feminism dominates often get bogged down in factional debates about who is the most oppressed; they become hopelessly performative and end up politically paralysed in consequence. Because their theory is incorrect, their practice is ineffective, if not counter-productive. This can be seen in the recent Reclaim These Streets campaigns in which one group, Sisters Uncut, ended up excluding, abusing and even excusing attacks on radical and Marxist feminists for their commitment to women's sex-based rights. Such campaigns demonstrate the persistence if not intractability of issues of race, sex and class and the limitations of existing liberal models of identity for addressing them.

In conclusion, we need a renewed commitment to a women's rights agenda on the basis of sex. And, most of all, we need put women's liberation at the heart of class politics. The Communist Party has begun to develop such an analysis, which can be found both in Mary Davis's book *Women and Class* and in our programme *Britain's Road to Socialism*. The Communist Party also endorses the *Charter for Women* as the basis for a mass movement and broad-based campaign to embed the battle against women's oppression in the labour and trade union movements. The aims and scope of the *Charter for Women* will now be taken up by Charlie Weinberg.

Notes and References

1 Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch 7, Sect 1, 'The Labour Process or the Production of Use-Value'; in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 35, p 184, and online at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm#11a.

2 T Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right*. Yale University Press, 2018, p 232.

3 L Penny, 'TERF wars: why transphobia has no place in feminism', June 16, 2020; online at https://pennyred.medium.com/terf-wars-why-transphobia-has-no-place-in-feminism-60d3156ad06e .

4 M Horn, 'Why do Marxist feminists oppose liberal feminists' claims that porn and prostitution are liberating for women?' online at https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/why-do-marxist-feminists-oppose-liberal-feminists-claims-porn-and-prostitution-are .

5 K Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, Issue 1, Article 8, pp 139-167.

6 F Ismail, 'Race, class and women's oppression', in K Connolly, E Graham-Leigh, F Ismail and L German, *Marxism and Women's Liberation*, Counterfire, 2016.

The Charter For Women

Charlie Weinberg

In introducing this conference Carol Stavris said that the struggle gives us hope. Perhaps for me it is more the solidarity and the sisterhood in which I find my hope, in order to continue and be loyal to the struggle. I think it is clear how and why we've retained the word 'struggle' – as both a metaphoric and a literal description of women's global experience – in the title of today's event, which I am pleased to be part of.

I have been working with girls and women in a variety of prison and community settings since 1993. For the last 15 of these 28 years, I have seen the increasingly targeted shift in the meaning of gender: from the place of women in social structures (and implicitly meaning both sex and gender as in 'women's studies', gender studies, race, class and gender and gender-specific services which used to be 'girls' work') to the elimination of sex on forms and applications; from women's single-sex spaces to 'inclusion' (meaning anyone and everyone); and from women's rights to 'all rights matter' rhetoric.

The Charter I'm going to talk about is the final few pages of *Women and Class*, the pamphlet available on the Communist Party website that I highly recommend if you haven't read it. It raises lots of questions, offers lots of historic context and provokes lots of responses. My copy of *Women and Class* is completely annotated with notes, underlinings and exclamation and question marks throughout. It was that book that brought me to the Communist Party.

I've seen the (international) women's movement undermined by identity politics, with an active focus on increasingly atomised specifics of individual experience and an undermining of the collective voice, experience and action that genuinely includes, inspires and involves women globally as a unifying group. The successes, achievements, beauty, occupation, financial comfort or product launch of any number of women do not equate to liberation, class consciousness or radical social change. These exceptions merely prove the rule – exceptions occur, but the vast proportion of the global majority (women and girls) are poorer, less autonomous, more likely to experience multiple forms of coercion and control, low wages, sexualised violence, the brunt end of inequitable domestic relations, multiple exploitation and the multiple binds of racism, misogyny and class oppression.

As Sonya Andermahr has pointed out, 'men vs capitalism' as our greatest oppressor is a false dichotomy. Pornography, prostitution and the absolute normalisation of the sexualised exploitation of women and girls require, if not demand, a class response. Until and unless the working class coheres to achieve women's rights, only some workers' rights will be prioritised. They won't be women's rights.

In creating the *Women's Charter*, Mary Davis focused our collective mind on the economic, political and ideological oppression of women as a prerequisite of capitalism. Class liberation does not exist in isolation from women's liberation. It cannot and must not be allowed to be imagined in such a way. Until women are understood as an essential living, breathing, active part of the working class, there is no revolution.

This is the route that led me to the Party, as I have said. The Communist Party has been working on disseminating a Marxist feminist analysis since 1990. The *Charter for Women* is a template for the dialectical development of women's parity in socialist community through social policy, the labour market and the labour movement. The *Charter* is designed to refocus our sights on collective women's rights and not on individual identities; and it reminds us that the interests of those who sell labour power for a wage are distinct from those who buy labour power to extract a profit.

In my personal as well as my professional life, I can absolutely testify to the reality of women's rights being under calculated attack. Women's rights have never been a mainstream political priority; but in the past we did at least have words, spaces and shared understandings with which to articulate the idea of women's liberation – even if we had broadly different theories and approaches for achieving it. As I think our colleague Linda Bellos said "Sex is that we are oppressed – gender is how".

The *Women's Charter*, therefore, sets out some key principles for action. Fundamental to the priority of women's liberation is an education programme. The educational process needs to consistently prioritise and make clear the value and importance of women's sex-based rights, spaces and protections. Consciousness-raising is a vital process throughout our political life. We need to ask:

- How do sexism and misogyny serve the ruling class and dominant ideological drivers?
- Whose interests are served by women being harassed, harangued and hurt for protecting our rights and spaces?
- Why do these rights and spaces exist and how and why did they arise?

We are all aware of how women are exploited as workers, and as homemakers, carers, cooks, nurses, teachers, counsellors, mediators, advisors, shoppers, cleaners, negotiators, scapegoats, punchbags, child rearers, 'birth-givers', surrogates, prostitutes, chattel and assets around the world. Women's liberation has always been subjugated to wider successes and priorities in class and ideological revolution – and never attained. The irony is that women's liberation could come first and enable wider class liberation. The class struggle must include women's liberation as a key feature if it is to succeed or to have any integrity.

We have excellent evidence that class consciousness and women's engaged activism lead to powerful social movements. We only need look for recent examples in Ireland, Rwanda, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Brazil, Spain and Poland, as well as the concerted movement to safeguard children and protect women's rights from 'Men's Rights' activism. We need to organise together and will always need to do so, not least to protect ourselves against the sexist and racist oppression so deeply and profoundly embedded throughout global structures after so many years of capitalism. We shall need to ensure that women's interests are continually prioritised, even in the most fully socialist society or movement. The potential for lapse, collapse or a return to old ways is always alive.

The danger of being undermined and overlooked for Black people and for women is too great and we must never confuse women's liberation as a single event. It is a dialectical process. Social relations require attention, commitment and investment.

All working-class people must understand and believe women's liberation to be in their own interests. This is the *Charter's* intent. This does not mean that women will never cook, clean or care again. It means we will not be forced or limited or expected to do so at the expense of other opportunities, activities or desires. Our existence will not be expected to be designed

around the care of others – just as anti-racist work doesn't mean that Black people will no longer organise with European-heritage or Caucasian people.

It means that friendships, alliances and power dynamics will be organised and redefined to free Black people and women from embedded harms, limitations and dangers. Anti-racist, anti-sexist labour is part of the class struggle. The *Charter* asks us all to commit to this and to genuinely centre those for whom liberation is least accessible, as a route to class liberation for us all.

Women's liberation is about looking after ourselves; and each other.

WOMEN AND SOCIETY

Misogyny, austerity and the barriers to education

Mollie Brown

I do think that understanding theory is vital moving forward so I'm going to try and put some of this theory into context, based on my own experiences and what I have witnessed as a woman, a mother, an activist and a mature student. It is very much around the topics of barriers in higher education, misogyny and austerity.

I left school at 14, mainly due to a horrible a piece of experience with an older man. I did manage to return to college at 16 and scraped through, achieving only one GCSE. I then had my first child at 18, followed by another two in my 20s; and throughout those years I did struggle as a single parent on benefits, in and out of work. Due to that, I have been in some very dark places, both mentally and financially. But here I am now at 40, a mother of three, and a mature student. Having just finished my degree in criminology, I am now studying for a master's in social research methods and social policy at Durham University.

I really want to talk about the struggles that I have faced, trying to complete a degree, a master's, work and the expected role of running a home and caring for children; the misogynistic attitudes that women face from so many sections of society; the barriers that are put in place for working-class women who are trying to further their education and prospects; and how that has all significantly worsened during austerity and the pandemic.

Durham University is an elitist university in a working-class area of the North East of England, where only 54.6% of admissions come from state schools, which is below the target of only 60%. It also has one of the least diverse student bodies in Britain. But often people will say that I'm really lucky to have got a place at such an elitist institution. I say, why am I lucky? I have worked just as hard as anyone else in the university – probably harder, given the barriers that I have had to overcome to get there. But not only that: when we working-class students are treated with such disregard, why would we even want to be there in the first place?

You would have likely heard the appalling stories that hit the headlines last year after some boys wrote the most horrendous bile in the group chat, Durham Boys Making the Noise. They said things like 'competitions to sleep with the poorest girl at the University' and discussed their idea of what rape was. It was all very dark and disgusting. But the attitude that such lads come out with at Durham University is ingrained into them. Many feel that they are privileged and emboldened enough by their class status to treat other students – working-class and women – with such contempt.

Why? Because they are brought up with those attitudes – learned at the public schools that they go to. In their minds, what is the point in a private education if you're not going to be in a better class, a better position in society, better than those in state education? Being a mature student, I didn't have to mix with, or live in residence with, such people daily but there were many that did.

And why would people, especially girls, go to university in their home town or city, only to be subject to such misogyny and disrespect? So it really does expose the fact that misogynistic and classist attitudes are still rife today in all sections of society.

I'm sure that Durham isn't the only university to encounter these problems. However, in the North East they do seem to be further conflated by stereotypes of working-class lasses, which are constantly peddled in the mainstream media; by TV shows such as *Geordie Shore* that give a false impression that Geordie lasses are well, up for it, as well as narratives about lasses from 'up North', because of what they wear on nights out, how they talk and what sort of area are they from. This, combined with the outdated misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes instilled in public schoolboys, is a recipe for disaster.

I do welcome the punishment that the University eventually dished out, which was expulsion, but I also think that it is washing its hands of the problem, which is more deeply rooted and won't be solved until the barriers to working-class students are lifted – and that would mean elitist universities rethinking how they operate.

The University in Durham and its systems are built on class inequality – it's in the foundations. In 2016 there was a campaign for Durham to move towards a target of 75% admission from state schools, but the University resisted. Why? It argued that that would result in lowering entry requirements, which in turn would affect its league table position and prestige status, so it seems there was very little interest in putting these problems right. Although Durham is in a historically working-class area, only 14.2% of its students are working-class and only 6.8% are from deprived areas – which makes you question the purpose of the University. Is it there to teach and develop all students in their education and knowledge, or is it just a processing point for those already fine-tuned students to continue producing first-class results?

So, these are the problems facing working-class students and women in an elitist university. But let's talk as well about the challenges that we face in getting there in the first place – and, believe me, being a woman is one of the biggest challenges of all. We all know that, since austerity was introduced, women are disproportionately affected, mainly because of their already subordinate positions in society, as Carol Stavris mentioned at the start of the conference. We are the main caregivers to family and children, and we do most of the jobs in the public sector that have been subjected to pay freezes and cuts. The introduction of Universal Credit has seen women plunge deeper into poverty, and the opportunity to better themselves through higher education has been pushed further out of reach.

For example: loans and grants from Student Finance are now regarded as disposable income against Universal Credit. That means that every £ of student income is deducted, £ for £, from any Universal Credit award. I witnessed many friends, with whom I went through college, leave degrees half-finished and return to zero-hours contracts and poor jobs because they just couldn't continue financially. It's clear that achieving any kind of higher education has nothing at all to do with meritocracy, and everything to do with your class position.

And then came the pandemic. This has further exacerbated opportunity and expectations for women. Many have been expected over the last year to struggle with home-schooling their children, while supporting them emotionally, continuing to work and study from home, and tackling the enormity of running a household. And then there are also those who have been expected to continue working on the front line, as key workers in retail, care and cleaning, and as well as balancing childcare, which has been absolutely impossible for some – and it has been relentless.

On a personal level, due to my other half being self-employed and not entitled to any help – but that's a story for another meeting – I have actually found part-time work in the local Co-op, cleaning in the evenings – that's had a knock-on effect on time to dedicate to my studies and things that I need to do at home.

You would think, given the current climate, that there would be unconditional support from the University, but there wasn't. I asked for an extension of four weeks to one of my assignments. I explained the changing nature of the situation, overseeing pressures of home-schooling children and working. I was told by a male professor that my circumstances didn't warrant the extension I had requested, and after a battle I was finally given two weeks extra, very begrudgingly. I was told, you can study at weekends – with two kids I would like to see him try – and when my husband finishes work – it's often 9 pm. And it just shows a sheer lack of understanding of the workload of a woman as a mother, a worker and a student, and the pressure that we find ourselves in when we must juggle everything just to make sure the bills are paid.

The barriers for women in the higher education system are huge but for working-class women it's almost impossible. And not only is it hard enough to get in the position of being able to go to college or university at school-leaving age, when you come from a working-class background – which is why many mature students, particularly women, are from working-class backgrounds – but universities such as Durham just don't cater for that.

When we get to a point in life, where we try and better ourselves, it is made so hard. The way the system operates, we are not allowed to stay at home and nurture our children, because that's 'lazy'. We can't go back into education and better ourselves because we can't afford it. So what can we do? We can get a rubbish zero-hours contract job working ridiculous hours that pays so little that the government has to top it up in in-work benefits which in turn supports low-paying precarious work.

But we mustn't give up. The system will never change until we become part of the system that makes the rules and devises the policy. And getting there is almost impossible for working-class women, of course – that's no accident, but a very carefully devised tactic to keep us in a place. However, we must continue to fight this.

I know that many think that I am in a privileged position to be able to further my education. Sometimes I do think the same: what am I complaining about? But I have had to cross many barriers to get where I am, and it hasn't been easy. I have nearly given up on so many occasions, because to me it's so hard.

But I do believe that every woman from any background should be afforded the right to better herself, and to develop her education should she choose to. No woman should be in a position where she has to choose between children, marriage and personal development – it should be a given right to have all of those. But if that were the case, then we'd probably be in a country run by working-class women, and that just wouldn't do really, would it?

Even now, even with an education, we are still looked down upon by public school-educated men. Just recently I had this attitude from someone of whom I would have expected better, someone in the labour movement, not in the Communist Party. He just talked down to me constantly, refused to see me as equal, constantly undermined me and suggested on a few occasions that I didn't even know what I was talking about.

Now is that because I'm a woman? I'd say, partly. Because I'm a working-class woman? I'd say definitely, and it amounted to nothing more than bullying.

So the struggle is still very real. And although women have made boundless achievements over the decades, they have not been easily won, and the struggle for equality and recognition, to get an equal place in society, is very far from over. I think under this government, and with the election results on 7 May, things are only set to get worse.

I'll just end with this: that we must continue to oppose attacks on women's equality; women must be in the forefront of the struggle; we must demand our right to education and to live without barriers and poverty; and women will speak out and be heard.

Against domestic violence and for abortion rights

Kellie O'Dowd

I have been involved in the struggle against domestic violence (DV) and for abortion rights in Northern Ireland for some time, and what is evident to me is that it suits capitalism and the ruling class to keep women scared and pregnant. This is the struggle over our very bodies, which are the battleground.

First I would like to speak about abortion. I was involved in the Northern Ireland activist group Alliance for Choice from 2008 to 2019. In October 2019 abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland, which actually means – on paper – that NI now has more progressive abortion laws than England, Scotland and Wales, where the 1967 Abortion Act is still on the statutes, and which is a piece of legislation that defends doctors from prosecution.

But here is the contradiction. Although abortion has been decriminalised in Northern Ireland, women who are over 10 weeks pregnant still have to travel to Britain for surgical abortions, which is the same for women and girls in the Republic of Ireland. In fact many abortion rights activists who want to move to decriminalisation in Britain are afraid to do so because opening up the abortion debate could actually lead to more restrictive

legislation.

So, on the face of it, it looks like we have all these progressive liberal laws, but actually we don't. We need to remember that abortion was legalised in Great Britain, not because of any idea of progression or women's rights, but because women were dying or were becoming seriously ill because of backstreet abortions.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been granted leave to take a judicial review against the Secretary of State and the Department of Health for the failure to commission and fund abortion services in Northern Ireland. The case was heard at the end of May 2021 and judgement has been reserved.

In October 2020, a court within Poland ruled that ending the life of a deformed foetus was unconstitutional, effectively making abortion illegal in almost any circumstances across the country. So, women no longer have the 'right to choose' in Poland, with termination of pregnancies only being permitted in cases where a woman's life is in danger, or in cases of rape and incest; only around 2% of all cases. Many of you may have seen the media coverage of the amazing protests at this law change.

It is estimated that about 100,000 Polish women travel abroad each year in order to get around the tight restrictions, of what most European nations consider as a right. My friend in Berlin has been asking me how we helped women here with abortion pills, because that it what she is hoping to do for Polish women. In fact, abortion was legal in Poland under communism but since1989 the Catholic church has been steadily pushing back on these rights.

Even though there were restrictions in Poland, women could still access abortion because the service still existed illegally. In South Africa abortion was legalised in 1996, but the stigma and lack of commissioning of services makes it extremely difficult to access an abortion. So it is one thing to change the law, but it is entirely another for women to gain access to free, safe, legal and local abortion services provided by the state. Even in Great Britain, abortion services are subcontracted to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and Marie Stopes, with very few provided by the NHS itself. This to me smacks of the stigma that still exists around abortion.

According to the World Health Organisation and the Guttmacher Institute, at least 22,800 women die annually as a result of complications of unsafe abortion, and between two million and seven million women each year survive unsafe abortion but sustain long-term damage or disease.[1] So it is time to see abortion for what it is – **a public good.** It needs to be recognised as such and destigmatised. I am delighted to have taken up a post with a new charity, Abortion Talk, which aims to destigmatise and normalise abortion. After all one woman in three will access an abortion in her lifetime.

As Marxists we know that women's liberation is about more than political rights. Even the fullest extension of bourgeois democracy will not liberate women because it cannot abolish the material basis of female subordination, in capitalist exploitation. However, this does not mean that it is not important in the struggle for political rights, as it forces capitalism to fulfil its promise of formal equality, and it allows us as class-conscious feminists to challenge women's oppression through fighting the everyday battles of women's lives and reality. To deny women abortion rights is the same as forcing them into reproductive slavery, and that is why abortion is so important in the lives of women and the struggle for socialism.

Without a Marxist feminist analysis, abortion rights can be viewed as 'choice' or slogan politics, but it is an issue where we can provide a class analysis and build socialism through struggle and raising class consciousness.

To discuss domestic and sexual violence after a year of the pandemic is utterly depressing. In Northern Ireland, for example, we have just had the first piece of legislation that actually makes DV a criminal offence. Yes, it was not a criminal offence until this year, but again I think this legal recognition goes no way towards tackling the underlying causes of domestic and sexual violence, which finds its origins in religion, sexist stereotypes, lack of understanding of what constitutes healthy relationships and good old-fashioned misogyny.

The fantastic work of Karen Ingala Smith on the Counting Dead Women project[2] allows us to get a picture of what is happening in the UK. In 2019, 116 women died at the hands of partners/ex-partners, 25 so far in 2021. In Ireland there was an 88% increase in the number of domestic violence cases dealt with by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) last year. According to freedom of information figures, the DPP received 872 files from the Gardaí in 2020, compared to 465 the year before.

This comes as no surprise to those of us active in the field of ending male violence against women and girls. In April last year a report to MPs stated that calls to a national domestic abuse helpline rose by 49% and killings doubled, weeks after the start of lockdown.[3] Researchers at the Counting Dead Women project told MPs that 14 women and two children had been killed in the first three weeks of lockdown.

On 27 April 2020 the Home Affairs Select Committee published its report, *Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home*.[4] This was informed by written and oral evidence from organisations in the Violence Against Women & Girls[5] sector. They outlined that increased abuse is predicted, and there is a duty to act to prevent it; that Covid-19 'landed' on top of widespread abuse, deep inequalities, and victim-blaming; and, most poignantly, that Covid-19 does not cause abuse, but creates a 'conducive context' or perfect storm for it, while the diversion of public services removes vital safety nets, and voluntary sector support services face overload after years of Tory cuts and austerity. The first line of austerity attacks is always the cutting of funding to services for women and children, the most recent occasion being after the 2008 banking crisis.

The experiences and needs of disabled, BAME, migrant, homeless and destitute women and girls are always marginalised and made invisible, while there is a persistent tendency to tell victims to modify their behaviour rather than looking at what drives perpetrators of abuse.

Also in April 2020, Dr Jessica Taylor published *Why Women Are Blamed For Everything*: exploring victim blaming of women subjected to violence and trauma.[6] This book is an exploration of every conceivable way in which women are blamed for being abused by men, and how prevalent and normalised this is: from how women are encouraged to change their behaviour, through prevention and intervention programmes, to the psychiatric diagnosis and treatment of women and girls who disclose violence, abuse and exploitation.

Through her research Dr Taylor gives voice and agency to women who have experienced trauma and violence. Women articulate how they have felt about their portrayal in the media; how the police treated them; the way the legal system re-traumatised them; how their religion had them believe that the abuse was punishment by their god; the way their cultures and communities silenced and shamed them; the way rape-myth acceptance had them doubt what actually happened to them; and the way sexist ideals made them believe that their female bodies

had caused sexual violence.

I think that Dr Taylor's work exposes the structural oppression imposed by the ruling class, that flourishes under capitalism, with again working-class women and girls bearing the brunt of this oppression. She sets out a compelling case of how, through a mix of misogyny, rape myths, gender stereotypes, relationship norms, male entitlement to the female body and the rejection of women as independent sexual beings, our society reinforces the messages that violence and trauma inflicted upon women are all their own fault, with a cursory mention of men being the perpetrators of this violence and abuse.

It is time to turn the tables on this blame culture and put it exactly where it belongs: at the feet of the perpetrators and the belief systems and myths that prop up victim blaming. Women and girls are never to blame for the violence and abuse they are subjected to.

As Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." So we must continue our struggle for lives free from domestic and sexual violence and for our rights to reproductive healthcare, understanding that women's liberation will only be realised under socialism.

Notes and References

1 Figures given by https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unsafe_abortion, citing 'Induced Abortion Worldwide', Guttmacher Institute, 2016-05-10, retrieved 2018-03-08; however, the embedded link (https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide) leads to a more recent report which does not give those figures –*Ed.*
2 https://kareningalasmith.com/counting-dead-women/.
3 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52433520.
4 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/321/32102.htm.
5 https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/i-commission-work-survivors/violence-women-girls-sector-shared-core-standards/.
6 www.lulu.com; ISBN 978-0244498344.

Misogyny, racism and the feminisation of poverty

Pragna Patel

First of all, thank you for inviting me to this timely conference against the backdrop of such political turmoil and uncertainty. We live in a political age increasingly characterised by authoritarianism and the reinvigoration of the forces of illiberalism, misogyny and racism, at every level of society. Everywhere, those who dare to speak out for freedom, equality and justice are no longer safe. Those who oppose, resist and struggle are being criminalised, detained and killed just to shut them up. We are staring into a compassionless and lawless abyss. The coercive turn taken by the neoliberal and authoritarian state has disproportionately impacted on populations who are disadvantaged by race, class, sex and migration status.

In the UK, the current Home Secretary has mounted an unprecedented assault on the rights of migrants and asylum seekers through a raft of laws and policies that threaten to undermine this country's legal obligations to asylum seekers and refugees under international human rights law. Simultaneously, she has targeted immigration lawyers for defending the rights of migrants, a cynical and dangerous tactic that has its roots in authoritarian and fascist politics and has led directly to racist and violent attacks on migrants and immigration lawyers.

We at Southall Black Sisters (SBS) see at first hand the degeneration of political and civic life and its impact on some of the most powerless groups in society – Black and minority women – that we work with. We are witness to their daily struggles for freedom, autonomy and justice in a context of profound powerlessness generated by race, gender and class inequality.

The state's interaction with migrant women has led to the conflation of politicking practices and immigration controls that renders migrant women 'over-policed and underprotected': the police, acting solely as agents of the state, are seen to prioritise exclusion over their duty to protect, entrenching a racialised political order.

For example, over the last two decades in particular, we have also challenged government policy on data sharing between the Home Office and local services and organisations which is part of the government's unprecedented 'everyday bordering' agenda. It amounts to nothing less than a process of 'insourcing' surveillance that involves drawing a range of private, religious and public bodies as well as members of the public into the enforcement of immigration controls. The result is the increased criminalisation, detention and surveillance of migrants which, together with the withdrawal of legal aid so necessary to challenge immigration abuses of power, has left us reeling on many fronts.

Measures like these have greatly hampered our ability to help women assert their right to protection, liberty and even life itself, in the face of domestic and sexual abuse. They have made women fearful of public institutions – even those that should be driven by a duty of care, such as the police and social services. Instead, these agencies are now driven by authoritarian imperatives that involve mandated passport checks and information sharing with Home Office immigration-enforcement teams, to ensure limited or no access to schools, hospitals, other health care and rented housing, and to create a climate of fear.

Locked in abuse

But it isn't state racism alone that is reinforced by the hostile immigration policies. The government has also entrenched the patriarchal social order by creating conducive contexts to abuse and coercive control of certain groups of women. At least 60% or more of the women that contact SBS have been subject to gender-based violence and have insecure immigration status. Some are dependent on their partners or spouses for their immigration status, whilst others arrive in the UK through other immigration routes. Most are subject to the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) rule in immigration law, which works not only to make women financially dependent on their abusers, but also to trap them in situations of abuse, exploitation and harm, where their abusive partners use the lack of status as a means to exercise absolute power.

NRPF, a central plank of the government's 'hostile environment' policy, is a legal restriction imposed by the UK Border Agency on people subject to immigration control, preventing them from accessing most forms of welfare benefits and social housing. Breaching this condition puts a person's current or future right to be in the UK at risk. Some of the most

recurrent experiences that women report include being abandoned, imprisoned in their home with no contact with their own families or the outside world, subject to extreme forms of servitude, neglect and cruelty, having their documents and valuable possessions taken away from them, and being constantly threatened with violence and deportation if they report abuse to any outside bodies.

Almost all women contacting us tell us that they are too scared to report their experiences because of their insecure immigration status, economic dependence on their partners and the NRPF condition. As a consequence, they find themselves locked in abuse in which violence often escalates and there is no way out. They face hostility in the home and hostility in the outside world which means that they live in a state of permanent fear: fear of what will happen to them if they stay and fear of what will happen if they leave abuse.

No recourse – no safety

We struggle on a daily basis to support women with NRPF because the normal routes of safety are simply not available to them. They cannot go to the local authority (unless children are involved and even then it is difficult) or to a refuge, because refuges rely on rental income and do not have the experience or expertise to support migrant women with complex needs. As a consequence, many women are forced to rely on charity and hand-outs from strangers and in the process subject themselves to other forms of abuse, exploitation and harm. As a further consequence, we see high rates of destitution, poverty, indebtedness and trauma and mental illness amongst abused migrant women and children.

The denial of safety and protection for abused migrant women not only has severe consequences for women; it also means that perpetrators go unpunished since it guarantees women's silence.

We have spent almost three decades trying to assist individual women to obtain a right of stay in the UK in the face of domestic or other forms of gender-related harms and we have struggled to create more human rights-compliant immigration laws and policy. We find that just when we make some headway, we are hit by wider regressive and ever restrictive immigration policies that have a number of serious consequences for this group of vulnerable women as well as other migrant groups, including families with children.

Despite the considerable campaigning and lobbying around the recent Domestic Abuse Bill, the government chose not to enshrine protective measures for migrant women in it, and it became law on 29 April 2021. Along with others, we called for a series of reforms that included ending the NRPF for abused migrant women and allowing them indefinite leave to remain. Had these amendments been accepted, they would have put a decisive end to the two-tier discriminatory system of support that exists for victims of abuse in the UK; a system which determines whether or not a woman deserves safety and security, based on her immigration status. Had these amendments been accepted, they would have also ended the climate of impunity that exists for perpetrators who harm women without consequence, precisely because of their insecure immigration status. Ultimately this situation undermines the government's stated goal of protecting victims and prosecuting and preventing violence against women and girls.

But there are small rays of hope: there have been recent cases where Courts have ruled that denying British children access to welfare support is unlawful, because the NRPF policy is potentially in breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits inhuman and degrading treatment. Just the week before this webinar, a Court ruled that the NRPF policy failed to protect the rights of children.

Conclusion

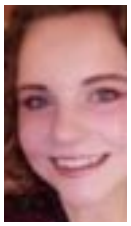
The Windrush affair, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter campaigns have shed light on the deep and widening nature of structural economic and racial inequality in the UK, and yet the government persists in prioritising and reproducing racialised structures of inclusion, and exclusion from protection and rights. In the context of domestic abuse, it has prioritised narratives about 'illegal immigrants' and their perceived propensity to 'manipulate the immigration system' for which there is no evidential basis. It has also prioritised the institutionalisation of abuse, cruelty and destitution over the need to guarantee protection.

What we are left with in response are strategies that involve turning to the law or taking to the streets in protest; and yet these very spaces are now the subject of an assault by a government whose agenda is to shrink them through laws – such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. The government's aim is precisely to reshape civil society to serve the interests of the powerful. But no government can pursue or defend cruel and inhuman policies towards the powerless indefinitely. Sooner or later, it will come undone because the history of the world tells us that democracy lies in the people and the people will resist.

WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

Casual work in the pandemic

Lauren Conway



I work in the privatised education system, mostly in large academy chains across the North East of England. Currently I am employed by agency Capita as a supply teaching assistant, but also as a cover supervisor, which is a fairly new job title that has been created in the last year; basically it allows unqualified people to teach classes, but on a lower rate of pay.

I started out my working life as an apprentice in a school finance office in 2010. It was the school that I used to attend, and back then supply staff were employed primarily by the schools themselves or by the local council. I did the payroll, so I know that the going rate then for a supply teacher was £90 for a morning and £110 for an afternoon. Now, presumably, that money goes to the agency, which takes its cut, so I am currently left with £70 a day. When you take into account that we don't get paid for the holidays, and also I don't get called in every day and haven't been for a while, then you can see that it's been a bit of a struggle during lock-

down, about which I'll explain more later.

As academy chains are run now for profit, they have a big incentive to hire more and more temporary staff on these really shoddy zero-hours contracts, which don't include sick pay or any of the other benefits that permanent members of staff are entitled to. In the schools where I work, there are 10 to 15 supply staff at any one time, so we are actually taking the jobs of directly-employed staff.

Since October 2020 I have been trying to organise the agency from scratch – something I had not done before. I set up a 'workplace' group chat, and I have been trying to speak to people about trade unions. Nobody knows what a union is. Over the course of the pandemic the agency hired lots and lots of supply staff to get through the Covid absences, and we noticed just through talking to each other that each person seemed to be employed on a reduced rate.

As I said, I'm getting about £70 a day, but the staff that were taken on after me are getting around £60, and the rate just seems to be getting lower and lower. We spoke to staff who have been employed for a little bit longer, and they are getting £120 or thereabouts. After Christmas we came back, expecting the schools to be open; but after one day, we were told that they were going to shut, and because we were classed as temporary supply workers, on zero-hours contracts, we weren't due any furlough pay.

So I thought that this group chat would be an opportunity for getting people introduced to unions, for doing something about the pay differences and hopefully for finding people to come along to union meetings with me. But it has just been people sharing stories of their bills bouncing out of their accounts, and their relationships with their partners becoming really hard because they are relying on one wage. It has pushed all of the women in my group chat into dependency, on either their partners or their parents.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones, because I have plans to move away as soon as the borders are open, so I feel like a kind of a tourist. My boyfriend is really supportive, and we have enough money between us to cope, because we're not due any Universal Credit. But I've got friends whose bills are bouncing, while the mental health of people in this group chat has been really suffering throughout the course of the pandemic.

But it's not just the effect on us as workers: the school children are unfortunately getting substandard education from us. The minute that we cut our teeth in front of children we don't get any training. I didn't even have a practical interview – basically just a telephone call and a check on my Disclosure & Barring Service status. And that's it, I am put in a classroom in front of students, so all of the risk – all of the things that could go wrong in that classroom when we have thirty 11-year olds, all of the things that could happen to the kids – is put on the individual. And that's terrible for the children as well.

I know that these working practices are just expanding. Last week I found out that if I were to apply for, and get, a directly-employed job in one of the schools where I'm working, the school would have to pay the agency £700. I was shocked and outraged, because it is not written anywhere in my contract. But clearly there is a disincentive for the schools to hire us on that basis: if we were competing against applicants not on the agency's books, they would be more likely to get the job.

The academy schools where we work tend to be in the poorer areas, and use more agency-supply unqualified staff because they feel they can get away with it. But these are also schools which are moving towards more of a disciplinary approach, because the Tory line of thinking is that these kids from poorer areas just need more discipline, they need more shouting at them.

Now I can't prove this, but it seems from our group chat that men have been given more work in these schools throughout the pandemic, especially men with backgrounds as bouncers or in sports, who are quite big physically and can scare the children. A lot of the agency managers are men, and I feel that they tend to look after the boys more. There is a perception that women in the helping professions are just working for a little bit of extra money on the side, for pin money, and are not providers.

I have been in situations where I have been put in front of class, and it has been a baptism of fire. Before Christmas I was asked to teach in a secondary school, whereas up to then I had only worked with nursery-age children. When I said that I wasn't really sure, since I hadn't been trained, I was told, you'll be fine, because the manager really needed me to go and do it, and also the agency gets more of a cut because I'm cheaper.

In situations like this, we are taking work that we do not necessarily feel confident in doing. Also, we are scabbing, because there are qualified teachers on the agencies' books who usually get paid £130 a day, whereas I'm going to do that job for £70. But because I might not have been called in all week, I am not going to say no.

We agency workers don't have any trade union agreements, so I can just see us undercutting each other. I've reached out to my own unions – I'm in the IWW but also in the NEU – about this. I started out with the NEU, because I do believe that we are some of the most oppressed workers in education at the moment, working for these private companies and all on zero-hours contracts, with no rights. I was shocked to find that there's no campaign for us although, for me, this is where the bulk of the organising needs to be done.

The response I have had is that we need more agency staff to become members. However, those staff are not going to pay their subs when the bills have been bouncing out of their accounts for the past three months, and when they don't know where the next meal is going to come and they might be getting evicted. So I really think that people already in the union need to be reaching out and showing solidarity. We'll all have to give in order to get, if that makes sense.

We have underemployment and mass unemployment at the moment, and unions, across the board, should be fighting for full employment, for an end of casual contracts. We should be pushing for reversal of the privatisation and deprofessionalisation that we've seen in education.

We know that so much could be done to improve our communities. That's why capitalism is inherently undemocratic, because we do not get to decide what we spend our time working on, what resources get allocated towards that and how we work. The government can find billions of pounds for a track-and-trace system that doesn't work, but they can't find any money to improve education, tackle climate change or treat the mental health epidemic. We need to fund work that will not only eradicate suffering, but will also bring joy. We can create something that is worth living for.

Women in the NHS

Helen O'Connor

I organise for the GMB in the NHS where 77% of the workforce are women. They are working in clinical roles like nursing; they are health care assistants; they work in administrative roles, and also in facility services like cleaning and hostessing. There is abuse and exploitation of the workforce going on that people don't see happening, and it is rife, particularly in the areas where the private companies are operating.

I'm talking about all forms of abuse here: economic abuse, where people are literally not paid for the hours that they do; bullying and harassment; unreasonable expectations on workload; and it's not uncommon to come across very young female workers, telling you that the older married male manager is their boyfriend. We also have reports of this sort of abuse happening in the private ambulance transfer companies, as well as of young women being taken to strip clubs and bars by older men holding power in the company. We have reached a really dismal situation where women are sexually harassed in the workplace, but don't even know what it is, so they can't take action to do anything about it.

These private companies, ISS, Mitie and others, are not regulated properly and many don't even have the personnel structures in place to guide, advise and make sure that they are legally compliant. Workers can't even get access to the company policies in order to find out the rules; many of those workers are vulnerable, not speaking English, and some even have disabilities. A woman, particularly a migrant, working for such a company is very unlikely ever to find a route out, and so will be stuck with brutal working conditions, very low pay and job insecurity for her entire working life. There is little training and development given, and women workers on very low pay have to work in excess of 60, 70 or even 100 hours a week to try to make ends meet, particularly in London.

In the private companies, workers also struggle to get secure hours. So, whenever a permanent worker on an NHS contract leaves, the company will just put the job out as a part-time role, and maybe put out the rest of the hours as overtime, if they replace the person at all. Women in particular find it really difficult to organise their lives around that, because the overtime will be put out that day or maybe even the day before. And if anyone feels like complaining about the unfairness or the injustice, the manager will just refuse them overtime, and then they won't be able to make ends meet. You can just imagine the kind of impact these working conditions have on women, and on children, family life and leisure time, and on that woman's health and wellbeing as well.

As one of my reps, who works for one of these private companies, said to me: when parents are forced to work 24/7 just to make ends meet, the drug dealer or the gang leader then becomes the mother and the father of the child.

Big workloads are actually a problem throughout the NHS. I remember that, in my very last NHS job, the employer gave us laptops but the managers wouldn't allow us the advantage of working some of the hours from home. Instead, they said that we could take the laptops home in our free time, so we could catch up on workload during evenings and weekends etc, which lots of people did because the pressure was just horrendous.

Women employed in roles like nursing – and most nurses are women – have always worked hard, over and above the call of duty, to care for their patients. But years of cuts in staffing, and the exodus of experienced staff, have created crushing workplace conditions. Nurses routinely skip breaks, come in early and stay late. They work for free to plug the staffing crisis that has developed in the NHS. Many are encouraged to believe, and they do believe, that if there is a serious untoward accident or incident the mistake is their fault, rather than a result of the systemic crisis that is building in the NHS. Individual nurses get blamed and disciplined, and they even get reported to their professional bodies, for issues to do with cuts and impossible workloads.

The NHS isn't a family-friendly employer either. It is notoriously difficult to get flexible working arrangements; and if you are one of the lucky ones, the arrangement still gets reviewed, even if it is still working really well for the employee. The law doesn't help us because legally a worker only has the right to request flexible working; it doesn't compel the employer to grant it. And why is nothing done? Because childcare is still seen as primarily a woman's problem to sort out, and women with childcare needs are still viewed as massive problem throughout the workforce generally, including in the NHS.

The other important point about public services is that women and children rely on them the most. Hence public sector workers are not only facing attacks on their own terms and conditions, but also losing access to public services and the NHS. Cuts mean that NHS services are moving, merging and disappearing, which impacts on the health and wellbeing of the workers and their children.

However, it is not all doom and gloom – there are some positive things happening with women, particularly in the NHS. One of the things I have been noticing is that women workers are getting more active in their trade unions. That is the key to protecting their own pay and terms and conditions, but also to protecting the NHS from these slick corporate managers who are actually committed to some privatisation.

But there are still far too many NHS staff, including the clinical staff, who don't know what a trade union is and what the power of collective trade union activity can do. Such collective activity, like organising union meetings, collective grievances, protests and strike ballots, all work particularly well in the NHS, and trade union action can and does move managers out of entrenched positions.

One thing that the pandemic has done is to politicise nurses, and this can only be welcomed. For the first time, they are starting to come together in a serious way, asking questions and making demands of their trade unions. Large numbers of them are now getting involved as activists, and it was the NHS women nurses who kickstarted the #NHSPAY15 campaign last summer. This campaign has won the backing of two major trade unions and continues to build momentum. It is led by young women, many of them with young children, so they are juggling nursing jobs and children while building this campaign as well. They are not giving up and they are not going away.

The truth is that women make the best trade union

organisers and the best political activists, with many attributes that make us good in these roles. One of the things we do is listen carefully, and that is one of the hallmarks of a really good union organiser. But also women are really the planners: we run budgets; we manage homes, kids and family affairs, as well as holding down jobs; and women get things done.

It is so important that, as women, we seek to involve ourselves in politics and in the trade unions, because women must come together to give ourselves a strong voice in the key issues that shape our lives and shape the lives of our families.

Women trade unionists can and do lead difficult work, but we as women need to support each other, and we need to support our trade union sisters who do get treated badly sometimes. The more experienced women activists need to encourage our sisters who are coming into activity, and to help them develop themselves to become leaders in their own rights.

If we genuinely want to advance conditions for women in our movement and beyond, there is no room for jealousy or big egos competing with each other – which I see sometimes – and we need to learn to operate collaboratively and effectively together.

As women, we should be aware that the Tory Party will be emboldened by the latest election results. They will gear up to go and harder to destroy public services and the NHS. The NHS is so important for all working-class people, particularly women, so uniting to protect it can't just be left to the NHS unions.

History has shown us that when conservative governments hold power, as they did throughout the 1980s in America and Britain, material conditions of working-class women do deteriorate, and women's rights and women's consciousness get rolled back. I think it is fair to say that things are getting worse for women on every front.

Women have suffered economic violence during the pandemic, alongside an increase in other forms of violence. The disgraceful handling of women by the police at the Clapham Common vigil made the news, and this is why a group of us formed Women Will Not Be Silenced. We believe that the current Police Bill going through Parliament will give the police unbridled power, which will not be a good development for women. The police force has an appalling track record of dealing with crimes against women, and we believe the structures of the police forces in this country are institutionally misogynistic.

Women Will Not Be Silenced has devised a set of demands[1] that we believe are achievable, and we are inviting all women to get involved with our campaign. Among other points, we want a stop to the dangerous defunding of the public services which women need, and furthermore we demand investment.

As women, we need to rebuild unity and solidarity with one another. Women will stick together and support each other in our trade unions, communities and campaigning organisations, and women can and must devise our own strategies and have our own groups for women, led by women, to protect ourselves and to make sure that our needs are prioritised and that we advance women's rights on every single front.

Notes and References

1 https://www.womenwillnotbesilenced.co.uk.

Sexual harassment in the workplace

Sarah Woolley

Every woman that I know has suffered some form of sexual harassment or violence, and most of them more than once, whether it be verbal comments, inappropriate messages or physical contact without consent. I'm sure you can think of a time where you've been made to feel uncomfortable because a man has made a sexual advance towards you, or worse, that you haven't asked for or even encouraged.

I can think of more examples in my lifetime than I have fingers on both hands. And while some men do experience sexual harassment, the fact is that every woman in their lifetime will experience a form of sexual harassment or violence, or both, and not enough is being done to change or challenge that.

It is shocking, but what is worse is that it's happening more and more in the workplace, by those generally in senior positions to the women that they harass. Those managers are supposed to be there to support and guide their workers, not make them feel uncomfortable or worse. In most cases employers have dealt with the matter appallingly.

In my union, the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union, we spent some time before the pandemic kicked in, talking to our members and reps about sexual harassment. They gave us examples like:

- raising an issue about a colleague acting inappropriately, and it being brushed off as banter;
- being subjected to lewd posters and calendars in staff areas, and being told, when they raised concern around the appropriateness of such things, that they were the one with the problem;
- a lack of protection from customers touching them inappropriately whilst they were trying to do their jobs, and managers not even challenging customers when they made explicit comments of what they would like to do to them in private, or making sure that those employees would stay past the end of their shift after such threats had been made;
- members who had been sexually harassed or physically assaulted by their line managers, or by those higher up, being pushed out of the business or made to move stores as if they were disposable and meaningless.

We were also told of situations where:

1 a manager put his hands on a woman and, when she protested about it, he subjected her to months and months of horrific bullying in the workplace, and nobody would listen to it other than her union reps;

2 a manager seriously sexually assaulted a woman employee, and the company, rather than dismiss the manager, moved him to another workplace without telling anybody, while the employee was forced to sign a non-disclosure agreement, leaving the next department vulnerable to the manager's actions with no knowledge of his history.

So what are we doing about this as a trade union?

Because it's OK knowing all these stories, but if we don't have anything in place to help and support our members and the workers in our industry, then it's not good enough.

Over the last few years, we have been working with Women Against Rape, learning from them and developing a network of contacts to whom we can assign survivors for help and support – such as counselling, because we haven't the ability or training to provide that.

When I became general secretary of the union, one of the first things I did was to approach our National Executive about sexual harassment, with a proposal that we develop an internal policy and process for our employees, but also a process for members to be able to raise their concerns, and report issues to us. The pandemic has obviously slowed that work down slightly. However, when we launch our new website at our online National Conference in June, we shall have a section of resources on it dedicated to sexual harassment in the workplace – what people can do, how they can report it – and an email address that members can contact anonymously, to report sexual harassment, if it should occur within the organisation of the Bakers' Union, or simply to reach out to for support if they aren't comfortable doing that branch level. After all, it's not easy to come forward in your branch, to say that there has been an issue in the workplace, especially if your branch secretary or reps are male. We know that, so we want to make it as easy as possible for people to contact us and let us support them.

Between Women Against Rape and the Ella Baker School of Organising, we are looking to roll out training for our reps, to enable them to support members if they do disclose that they have been harassed or worse – because we recognise that is a very different situation from representing a member in a disciplinary hearing or conducting wage negotiations. We know that the initial reaction and response of our reps is crucial to an individual, when they have been brave enough to confide in the first place, to disclose that something's happened to them and to ask for help.

Don't get me wrong: we are not proposing to train our reps to become counsellors, as I already mentioned; we'll signpost members to the professionals that can support them. But having that trusted person on site, whom our members can approach if something is wrong, is where we want to be. As a trade union, we should be that body that people can come to and say, I've got an issue, whatever it may be.

We are determined to work towards removing the stigma of sexual harassment for women, and towards empowering more women to come forward safely with our support, to report sexual harassment or violence in the workplace; and to hold employers accountable for the actions of their employees, no longer letting them just brush those actions under the carpet, move the problem elsewhere or give out non-disclosure agreements rather than deal with the issue. Survivors should not feel embarrassed or ashamed as a direct result of the behaviour of men: we are not to blame for their actions and definitely should not be silent.

I agree with Helen O'Connor that we do need to rebuild unity and solidarity in the workplace. We need to give our women members safe spaces, so that they can discuss and support each other, through issues like this and other issues that women face, because we don't have that enough in our movement. I'm determined that in the Bakers' Union our female members and our women representatives will have a voice.

WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT INTERNATIONALLY

No possibility of women's liberation under capitalism

Socorro Gomes

Communist Party of Brazil

First of all I'd like to extend my solidarity to Comrade Annie and to the comrades in the Communist Party of India.

I want to share with you a reflection about the challenges in our struggle and the importance of solidarity for women. Here in Brazil we particularly experience those challenges in the workers' struggles. Since 2015 we have been living through a period of attack on the progressive forces, and we have a retrograde government that is obscurantist, denying science, and has a neofascist tendency. Very extreme sacrifices are being imposed on the workers.

The people are living from one nightmare to another, and women's hard-won gains are under systematic attack. But women are coming together in their communities, forming support networks, and finding new ways of organising, and they are determined to take their struggle for rights and justice forward.

For us the pandemic is felt in a different way from elsewhere. The virus is attacking and killing many more women than men, and many more workers who live in the periphery. These are the least supported people – left on purpose to fend for themselves.

In Brazil 59% of heads of family are women. 70% of those caring for the sick, including those affected by the virus, are women. And the great majority of those women who are heads of families do not have a fixed income – they are workers in the informal economy, so to speak.

At this period of the pandemic, violence against women is sharpening. They are at home with a double workload, which is invisible.

The pandemic is also emphasising the differences between classes and between the nations in the world, between the powerful and the nations in the periphery. We need to stress that 85% of the vaccines are in the hands of a small number of imperialist powers. At this period of the pandemic, therefore, the countries that are already the victims of neoliberal policies are suffering much more. This demonstrates the contradiction between, on the one hand, the desire for progress and national sovereignty, and on the other, imperialist domination.

The crisis is again showing that under capitalism there is no possibility of the liberation of the women of the world. With the defeat of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society, we will have better conditions for this. Even though it is not going to be automatic, a great possibility for

the struggle for women's liberation will be available. Our achievements so far, and the examples of other peoples, give us the incentive of building of a broader participation of women as essential in this struggle.

Among other challenges there is a growing importance of the anti-imperialist struggle. Today, because the biggest capitalist power is declining, is in its decadence, there is a greater likelihood of imperialist oppression and wars. Our continent is a stage-setting for imperialist policies, and the attempt by the United States to maintain its hegemony.

This period of pandemic is also demonstrating the aggressive nature of the imperialists worldwide. The imperialist powers are appropriating for themselves all the medical means for tackling the pandemic – vaccination and treatment. US President Joe Biden, for instance, is saying to the world that the United States needs the vaccines for itself.

At the same time the cruel blockade against Latin American countries – Venezuela, Nicaragua and Ecuador – is being tightened, while the US, counting on the bourgeoisie and dominant classes in Brazil, Colombia and other countries, and in coordination within the Organisation of American States, is seeking to impose regime change, destroying the democracy and other institutions of the nations that do not submit to its policies.

This is also a period when the imperialist powers, the United States and the NATO members, are increasing their military budgets. In its imperialist stage capitalism becomes even more aggressive, oppressive and bellicose.

The fight at the base to strengthen anti-war and anti-imperialist culture is revolutionary. It definitely helps to create better conditions for the working class and revolutionary movements in the struggle for socialism.

The current situation emphasises the key founding principles of the World Peace Council in 1949. Peace, and the destruction and elimination of weapons of mass destruction are issues for all the peoples, because the peoples do not want war. No country attacked by US imperialism – eg Laos, Vietnam and Korea – had the initiative to unleash war. Today, as in the past, imperialist war, with such new methods as hybrid warfare, and even the use of domestic terror, is an instrument of oppression and of preventing the advance of the people's struggles.

So I believe that we communists face a big challenge: that of building anti-imperialist unity and unity of the anti-war movement, securing the elimination of nuclear weapons and of military bases throughout the world, and emphasising the vital importance of people's self-determination. It is essential to strengthen solidarity in this struggle

I want to thank you, comrades in the Communist Party of Britain and all the comrades for making this moment possible.

Notes and References

- Talk given in Portuguese and translated simultaneously by Moara Crivelente, a member of the International Relations Board of the Communist Party of Brazil; rendered into text form by the Editor, using the Facebook video and transcripts.

The problem is the system

Liz Rowley

Communist Party of Canada

Let me first express our sympathy and solidarity to Comrade Annie and her family, and to the Communist Parties of India today.

Let me start by thanking the Communist Party of Britain for the invitation to participate in this most interesting celebration of women's struggles for fundamental reforms and for socialist revolutions around the world.

Like you, we in the Communist Party of Canada have been working on this for the last hundred years – as we celebrate our centenary in May 2021.

It turns out that the road to socialism is a whole lot longer, with a whole lot more twists and turns, advances and setbacks, than I certainly anticipated when I joined the Communist Party in 1967. I was sure I would see socialism in my lifetime, in Canada. Now I'm sure we shall see socialism in this century, if not in my lifetime, because capitalism's time is up. It's a system in deep trouble. Its options are increasingly limited – mostly to war – at home and abroad. And this pandemic has outlined that fact so sharply to so many people. We are not all in this together. There are the rich and the rest. There are the workers, the women, the youth, and the unemployed on one side, and the corporations and their governments on the other. And that's why the Communist parties are growing, gaining new members, gaining influence for their policies, for their message of unity and struggle, for the real deal alternative of socialism.

It's also why the strike movement is rising, why young workers in precarious employment are organising, why women in Canada need to rebuild the powerful pan-Canadian women's movement that was second only to the Canadian Labour Congress in its influence and importance to the struggle for fundamental change. That's why neoliberal governments pulled the funding and dismantled the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), in the 1990s. They correctly recognised the significance of NAC, linked with organised labour, as a mighty force for fundamental change in Canada. That's what we have to rebuild today.

This pandemic, and the economic crisis it triggered, have created mass permanent unemployment and under-employment, for more than 40% of the workforce in Canada. Women's participation in the workforce is at a 30-year low, with even lower participation rates for Indigenous and racialised women and men, and youth.

Working conditions have also changed, with large numbers of women working from home with blurred hours of work that don't include overtime and often exceed their paid hours. Breaks are not to rest – but to care for their children who are also at home because schools and child-care centres are closed; or for their elderly relatives who may also be living with them.

Women comprise the largest majority of those who work in health care and education, and in many other parts of the public sector, delivering frontline services in very challenging and difficult conditions. Many veterans have taken retirement rather than risk illness or death from Covid, while right-wing

governments continue to make stupid and dangerous decisions that worsen conditions and endanger workers, their patients, their students, their workmates, and their families.

Long-term care – that is, residences for the elderly – is where 80% of Covid deaths have taken place in Canada, and coincidently – or not – where women comprise the majority of residents, and workers too.

So many have died because the largest proportion of these operations are private, for-profit corporations, which invest the minimum and extract the maximum. These 'homes' are chronically underfunded, understaffed and are in fact warehouses for the elderly, where residents were booked four to a room including both the sick and the well. Staff were almost all part-time, working in several facilities as a result, and carrying the virus with them from home to home, and then to their own homes where their families also became ill. Many of these women were immigrants and racialised workers making low wages, without pensions or benefits, or unions to protect them.

Women in other low-paid jobs, in retail, hospitality, tourism etc were also face to face with Covid through much of the last year. A few brief weeks of 'pandemic pay' quickly ended after the publicity value had waned for the employers. Meanwhile workers struggled to get personal protective equipment from their bosses.

What is the state of women today in Canada?

Women are exhausted. And if they live in close quarters, or are frontline workers, or work in mass production industries that are Covid hotspots, they are also likely to get sick. Packing-house workers in the meat industry have suffered with massive outbreaks of the disease, as have postal workers in sorting facilities, and seasonal workers on farms.

Capitalist governments have abandoned them, in favour in increasing corporate profits and private wealth. And the results are astounding: Canada's billionaires increased their wealth by $78 bn since March 2020. Today, 87 families own more money than the bottom 12 million Canadians combined.

Workers on the other hand, have seen their jobs, their savings, their homes, evaporate under their feet. They face mass evictions, foreclosures, and government relief payments and employment insurance benefits that won't even cover the rent. More than one million people are on the dole now, facing a 40% benefit cut in July and 100% in September. And so women are rising, despite everything, and because of everything.

Healthcare and hospital workers and their unions set the pace early on with protests and warnings. Black, Indigenous and racialised women, and their supporters, have been demonstrating nonstop against police violence and systemic racism for the past 10 months. Indigenous peoples, often led by women, have been blocking pipeline construction and occupying land taken by developers.

Women are in the forefront of the struggle for quality public childcare, for reproductive rights and access to women's healthcare services, for pay and employment equity, and very often for strong public services and social programmes. They are in the front lines of the struggle against femicide and violence against women and children, trans people and the 2sLGBTiQ community[1].

Women currently comprise 53.1% of the unionised workforce in Canada, and 63.3% of the public sector. The labour movement has been feminised, and strengthened because of it. In Quebec, 87% of public sector workers recently voted for a general strike.

Yet women's pay is just 73% of what a man would receive for work of equal value; and women will **lose** 14% of their pay annually for the first 5 years after giving birth. Further the corporate free trade agreements Canada has signed onto, like CETA[2] and the USMCA deal[3], are intended to drive down wages and pensions, working conditions, and union density in Canada, as well as privatise Medicare, public services and social programmes. We've lost a lot, and we stand to lose a lot more.

So there is a lot motivating women to fight **for** fundamental change today. And they are not alone. The Women's International Democratic Federation is leading the fight for women's equality rights around the world.

So what do Canadian Communists have to say to women about all this? We say women must organise to defend themselves and the gains that are being steadily eroded by neoliberal governments and corporations. We say women must recognise their allies – the trade union movement, the youth and student movement, Black, Indigenous, and racialised peoples, the Communist Party, and others, and work for a united struggle. We say women will be stronger if the fight moves onto the offensive, and brings the people out into the streets with demands for fundamental change, for a People's Recovery that includes: good jobs, wages, and pensions; affordable social housing, a Medicare system that includes long-term care, drugs, dental, vision and mental health care; a quality, public childcare system that's free; free post-secondary education; a green transition that protects workers' jobs, and includes public ownership of energy and natural resources; deep cuts to military spending; withdrawal from NATO and NORAD[4]; tax reform that puts the load on the corporations and the wealthy; and decisive action to curb corporate power – which stands in the way of all of this.

We say to women: capitalism is the disease – socialism is the cure. The problem is the system. The problem is capitalism. Whether it's childcare, or reproductive rights, or the environment, or unemployment, or war, the fundamental problem is capitalism. It's the elephant in the room. It's 'the one who must not be named'.

It's the one we **must** name, because it's the source of every other problem we face – as women, as workers, as human beings.

Our enemies know it. That's why they go to such lengths to smear socialism, to slander Communists, and why they spend so much time and money on anti-communist crusades, like the current rabid campaign against China. They are working overtime to inoculate working people against the appealing ideas and objectives of socialism and against the Communist parties that fight for them. Their fantastic lies, about genocide and forced sterilisation of Uyghur women, don't hold up, when the facts show the Uyghur population increased by 25% in 10 years, and jobs, living standards and educational levels also rose substantially.

Could it be that capitalist governments can't stand the comparison, when living standards and employment are dropping like stones in the capitalist countries, but not in China, or Cuba, or Vietnam? That China's GDP is growing at a roaring 18% this year, while it's in the basement – or worse – in the capitalist countries? That Covid is rampaging across the capitalist world – killing millions, but was contained with very few deaths in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos and People's Korea. That vaccines are being developed, produced and exported around the world – free of patents and Big Pharma profits in the socialist countries, but not in the capitalist countries where profit is everything and death is nothing?

The racist campaign against China is war propaganda – the same method used by Goebbels to manufacture consent for war and genocide in the 1930s. Indeed, we are witnessing the

growth of far-right and fascist movements around the globe, including in Canada. We need only look at Colombia to see what fascism looks like today.

In this situation working people must act. Women must act. For peace, for social progress, for socialism.

I joined the Communist Party when I was 17, because I knew another world was possible. I thought it was urgent then. I think it is urgent now. But it won't come without the active intervention of the women of your country and mine. It can't be done without the women, as equal partners in the struggle. And it will need a strong Communist Party with strong women leaders and cadres to build working class unity and militancy, and to forge the path ahead to socialism – in our countries, and in our time. Socialism or barbarism – that's the choice today.

Notes and References

1 2sLGBTiQ: acronym, commonly used in Canada, for two-spirited (2S), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus all other sexual and gender minorities; see, eg, https://www.colchestersac.ca/2slgbtiq/ –*Ed.*
2 CETA = EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement.
3 USMCA = United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.
4 NORAD = North American Aerospace Defence Command.

A Communist woman's observations on the South African National Democratic Revolution

Jenny Schreiner

South African Communist Party

Recognising the eagle with all its feathers, thank you for this empowering platform. Let me wish Comrade Raja a speedy recovery.

I talk **inspired by the activism** of South African Communist women in a century of Communist struggle around rights of women and particularly of women workers.

South Africa was formed through both intra-colonial struggle (British versus Dutch Afrikaners), and a struggle between these two colonial powers and their settlers against the indigenous people of this region of Africa. This ultimately led to a fascist and violent apartheid state, with forms of oppression and repression that made women particularly vulnerable. We saw this in the pass laws that kept women trapped into underdeveloped rural areas; and in arrests and detention with physical and sexual violence, highlighted in evidence to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Sixty years ago, we **took up arms against this regime**. Having played a role in the 1980s in the underground Umkhonto we Sizwe, and come out of a couple of years of incarceration, our battle in the Constitutional Assembly to establish the principles that guide our security services was a significant achievement. We adopted the doctrine of human security as a central tenet of national security. For the principle of living free from fear[1] to become a reality, we needed: (1) to transform the intelligence service from a means of repression to one of protection and development; (2) to eradicate the 'black-lives-don't-matter' attitude of the apartheid police, replacing it with an ethos of community policing; (3) to put the prisons system onto a rehabilitation path to a correctional service;[2] and (4) to create a defence force deployed in the national interest and national service.

In the last decade, we saw a **doctrinal shift back to state security**, with abuse of the security apparatus for factional and looting purposes. We now face the refocusing and rebuilding of state security services; and gender equality and gender transformation must be central to this. Two decades ago, I researched rape as a human security issue.[3] The scourge of gender-based violence and femicide in our country today reflects how far short the state and society have fallen in realising human security for women. To this end, the SACP-COSATU-Joe Slovo Foundation White Ribbon Campaign remains a priority area of struggle.

A revolution must deliver a sustainable livelihood for all, and for Black working-class and rural women in particular. Communist women in the 1940s and '50s organised women workers to join and lead trade unions, and established the Federation of South African Women which adopted the Women's Charter as a basic set of demands from South African women. Researching this history, being active in the United Women's Organisation, and being involved in uniting mass women's organisations across South Africa in the 1980s, taught us the importance of struggles focused on the most basic needs of working-class women – housing, crèches, cost of living, and support of striking workers. We incorrectly assumed in 1991 that women of the mass democratic movement would locate themselves in the re-formed ANC Women's League. This resulted in the relative demobilisation of working-class women, and in the rolling back of many of the gains made.

The Covid-19 pandemic has floodlit the gross inequality that still pervades South Africa, where more half of our population live in poverty. The SACP Red October Campaign, around hunger, healthcare, human settlements and water, seeks to address the manner in which this inequality and poverty impacts disproportionately on women. We have fought to sustain the Covid-19 Social Distress Relief Grant, as we campaign for a guarantee of a minimum income to every adult. A victory in this will give every woman financial independence, thereby profoundly shifting the patriarchal relations between man and wife, between women and their male family members. Economic equality remains elusive in the face of neoliberal economic policy, the relative weakening of the labour movement over the past decade and the exclusion of workers in the informal economy from the social protection and from the labour movement.

Equal access to the state and its services is fundamental to women's emancipation in a developing country. In 1994, we faced the challenge of integrating administrations and transforming the state. The government imbibed elements of neoliberal Thatcherism, such as privatisation through outsourcing services, and opted for a regulatory framework for Black economic empowerment. While the Black glass ceiling has been smashed, the gender glass ceiling has only been cracked enough to allow a few women through, and even this small gain is easily eroded. Gender mainstreaming has been a

zig-zag process. State capacity has been further eroded by corporate capture of the state by those hell-bent on primitive capital accumulation through looting and corruption. Resources that should have changed Black working-class women's lives have instead gone into the pockets of elements of the political elite, and amongst them women! Yet there are gains: for example, the opening up of democracy and freedom of identity has also brought to the fore struggles for equality for people across the gender spectrum.

The right to vote and be voted for are demands in our 1954 Women's Charter. Ours is a history of exclusion from the vote, based variously on gender, race and educational qualification. For this in part we can point to the colonial powers! In 1974, reaching voting age, faced with an all-white election, I cast my vote in handwriting for Nelson Mandela, then still on Robben Island. In 1994, I cast my vote for the second time, again for Nelson Mandela, with an X against the icon of the African National Congress (ANC). The principle of non-racialism, rooted in family values and actions over generations, has been championed by the SACP from its beginnings in 1921.

The democratic breakthrough in 1994 sent us, so recently out of the proverbial trenches, **into Parliament, albeit it in my case only for 3 years, again to join an institution and struggle for its transformation at the same time.** Thanks largely to the proportional representation system and the ANC's gender equity policy, there is a strong women's presence in Parliament. But experience also highlights that having women in leadership does not automatically translate into change in the lives of Black working-class women. Both the ideological outlook of the women in leadership, and the nature of institution itself, can limit its impact. The resource-intensive parliamentary system of full-time MPs, combined with the policy shifts to neoliberalism and new public management, does not provide the best vehicle for economic, social and political empowerment of Black working-class and rural women.

As we **gear up for local government elections in October 2021**, the SACP is faced with tactical issues on the modality of contesting elections. We have so far contested under the banner of the ANC, except in one municipality where the community rejected the ANC, based on its track record in that area. We are clear that we must stand firm against any imposition of unethical and unpopular candidates on communities. Our local government system combines constituency-based ward councillors and a proportional representation system. We have moved from 19% women councillors in 1995 to 41% in 2016, but significantly only 33% of ward councillors were women in the 2016 election results. The challenge is to find the women candidates who can successfully contest the ward seats.

In conclusion, our fight against colonialism and imperialism is a fight against patriarchy, racism and capitalism. We still struggle against the impact of colonialism of a special type on Black and working-class women, particularly the way in which Black peasant and working-class women were locked into social reproduction of capitalism, excluded and contained in ways significantly different from their menfolk, with colonial powers distorting culture and imposing further patriarchal practice on these women.

Our focus now is the **second more radical, and gender-mainstreamed, phase of socio-economic transformation,** with heightened struggle to eradicate the twin threats of corruption and neoliberalism. Our focus in our Party's Centenary year is to put people, and women in particular, before profits in our struggle against the fourfold crisis of capitalism – its economic reproduction, social reproduction, health pandemic and environmental dimensions.

This **requires the SACP as a vanguard party to pay specific attention** to the organisational tasks of gender equality, of women cadre development, of a gender transformative Party programme, and the mass mobilisation of the working class and its allies behind that socialist programme. The SACP is committed, in our second century, to fight against patriarchy through changing the structural social relations that embed patriarchy and sexism, alongside and intertwined with racism and capitalism, as we build our socialist future.

Notes and References

1 s198 of SA Constitution Act 108 of 1996: "National security must reflect the resolve of South Africans, as individuals and as a nation, to live as equals, to live in peace and harmony, to be free from fear and want and to seek a better life."

2 "The South African Department of Correctional Services is mandated to place offenders in a secure, safe and humane environment, to ensure that rehabilitation and successful reintegration programmes are implemented." https://www.gov.za/about-government/correctional-services.

3 J Schreiner, Masters in Security Studies, University of Pretoria

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental justice and women's role

Amy Field

I am speaking as a young woman who will inherit a world that has been pillaged, devastated and exploited. I am here to represent those who are worried that we won't have a world to survive in, let alone thrive in.

I am sure you have heard words like that a lot and, in many ways they are true. And I admired the climate strikers I have seen over the last few years – XR school strikes, led by young people and even children, who have stood up for the planet when the adults won't. The world is on the brink of destruction: floods, wildfires and cyclones are becoming more common by the year and communities are becoming ever more devastated. But what we must understand is that the destruction of the Earth is not the result of our individual carbon footprints. It is not because we didn't buy eco-friendly shampoo last week. It's because of an economic system that exploits human beings as much as it exploits the Earth.

The world's 50 largest companies account for more than half of global CO_2 emissions. The corporations who exploit workers, not only here but in the global South, through poverty pay and union suppression, are the same ones pumping out emissions, polluting farmlands and rivers with chemical waste,

poisoning their workers and poisoning us in the process.

Capitalism cannot exist without the destruction of the Earth, nor can it exist without the oppression of women. And, as with anything under capitalism, it will be women who will be most affected by the climate crisis. Across the world, women face disproportionate levels of poverty and economic exploitation, as our work, including domestic labour, is undervalued. Few will be able to afford to live once the planet is destroyed.

At the moment it is working-class women who look like bearing the brunt of the crisis. After a cyclone in Bangladesh in 1991, it was women who faced excess deaths as they bore the responsibility of finding their children amongst the rubble. Following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, it was women who faced higher rates of poverty and domestic violence, after being deprived of shelter and stability. And indeed, after the 1981 Loma Prieta earthquake in Nevada, there was a 50% increase in women seeking help from domestic abuse.

We need to understand that the current individualised approach to the climate crisis is not working; it will not save women. It is all well and good, doing our recycling, cutting down personal consumption and shouting slogans like "We stand for what we stand on" and "Rebel for life" – heard at XR protests – while sending off petitions that the government won't read. However, such actions ignore the facts that 10% of the world's population are in abject poverty and 132 million poor people live in areas with high flood risk. Let us be real here, the problem is capitalist exploitation and greed, which will inevitably lead to more famine and more deaths.

Scientists have told us that we have 8 years to avert climate catastrophe. As Communists, we must advocate for genuine change regarding how our society operates.

This country has the potential to operate with completely renewable energy, given the access to wind power, as well as the almost completely untapped potential of our seas. But it is only under socialism that we shall see this being tapped into in any meaningful way. Furthermore, it is only under socialism, that we shall see decent public services that we so desperately need, and not only reduce carbon emissions, but also enhance the lives of working people.

Decent public services are not glamorous, but we all know that a free reliable bus service is good for us and good for the planet. Utilities that are run on behalf of the people, rather than for profit, reduce wastage and prioritise the public good. For example, 3.1 bn litres of water – equivalent to about one third of total consumption –are lost every day in England and Wales, because it is not profitable to fix the broken water pipes.

The narrative that saving the planet involves working people reducing their quality of life is a false one. A greener future coincides with a society that prioritises the needs of working people over those of big businesses.

The fight for a greener future goes hand in hand with the fight for women's liberation and the fight for socialism. The Earth is being exploited, as are human beings. The capitalist system exploits, prostitutes and kills the Earth, just as it does all working people and especially working women. These fights do not exist in isolation, and it is we working women who must unite in solidarity with our class across the country and the globe, to save generations of women to come.

Rosa Luxemburg once said, it is "socialism or barbarism". That statement remains true today, just as it was

Women and the struggle in Cuba to mitigate the consequences of climate change

Lauren Collins

Climate change is driven by the overconsumption of wealthy capitalist countries, so needless to say, this is a crisis not of Cuba's making. Nevertheless, Cuba is facing immediate and current threats from increased ferocity of hurricanes, droughts and flooding. In the medium and long term, rising sea levels, coastal erosion, the rise of average temperatures and the salination of the ground, which cause threats to food production and water purity, are all challenges that, along with many other island nations in the Caribbean, the Pacific and elsewhere, Cuba faces.

The average annual temperature in Cuba has increased by nearly one degree Celsius since the middle of last century. Since 1960, rainfall patterns have changed, droughts have increased significantly, and the average sea level has risen by 6.77 cm to date. Coastal flooding, caused by the rising sea level and strong waves, represents a great danger to the natural heritage and to buildings along the coast.

Projections indicate that the sea level could rise by 27 cm on average by 2050 and 85 cm by 2100, causing the gradual loss of Cuba's surface area in low-lying coastal areas, as well as the salination of underground aquifers, affecting agriculture and the availability of fresh water.

Cuba's capacity for managing effects of hurricanes is exemplary, as recognised by the United Nations. This has been achieved by a combination of commitment and leadership by central government, and the localisation of detailed planning and preparation, with the participation of communities and local scientific expertise.

Extreme weather events do however have an especially harsh impacts on the lives of women, as generally they have greater responsibility during hurricane evacuations. They pack up the necessary personal belongings, often on their own and with children and the elderly in their care; and it tends to take longer for them to get back to work after these events, depending on how quickly support services like day-care centres and schools, and even places of work, are restored. This is a result of the gender-division of roles, which is still being fought in Cuba today, despite the many advances that have been made since the revolution in 1959. However, this does not imply that women are confined to gendered roles, as discussed below.

When it comes to mitigating the effects of climate change, a similar approach is taken to that for hurricanes, *ie* central leadership, community participation, and detailed local planning. The local scientific expertise is provided by the municipal university centres, the presence at local level which all Cuba's provincial universities maintain.

Project Life

Cuba has a comprehensive plan for mitigating the effects of climate change on the island, in which women play a central role. The plan is known as *Tarea Vida (Project Life* in English). Its five main elements are:

- No construction of new houses is permitted in areas threatened by coastal erosion and rising sea levels. Also, in the most vulnerable coastal settlements, whose disappearance is predicted due to permanent flooding, whole communities are to be moved inland by creating new villages further back from the coast.
- Where conditions allow communities to remain, coastal defences, both natural and man-made, are undertaken.
- Agricultural practices are being adapted, particularly those with the greatest impact on food security of the country. Farms are being relocated away from areas where underground aquifers are becoming salty due to rising sea levels. Crops are being diversified, both to improve soil conditions and to introduce varieties which are resistant to high temperatures and drought.
- In urban areas, infrastructure will be adapted, such as strengthened bridges, roads, and water channels, and flood defences on riverbanks. Lower-cost measures with natural solutions, like beach recovery or reafforestation, will be prioritised.

Women are involved in all elements of *Tarea Vida*, both in terms of scientific expertise needed to elaborate plans and research solutions, and also in the practical implementation of the plans.

Women, work and leadership roles

Cuba's capacity for managing climate change stems from the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the consequent education revolution, which provided all women with educational opportunities, previously unavailable to them.

Today, women comprise 46% of the state labour force and 17% of the non-state sector. They make up 58% of all university graduates and more than 62% of current university students. 53% of those who work in science are women; and women hold many important leadership roles in the field of scientific research.

The Ministry for Science, Technology and the Environments (CITMA) is headed by Elba Rosa Pérez Montoya, a position which she has held since 2012. CITMA plays a major role in supporting and directing the implementation of *Tarea Vida*, as well as responding to hurricanes and pandemics and directing scientific research in Cuba.

Two thirds of positions in Cuba's science and technology sector are held by women, which is one of the highest levels in the world, compared with roughly 25% in Europe and 11% in the UK. Women also make up nearly 30% of the members of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, compared with 10% in the United States. They comprise 50% of those who work in engineering, a field which is historically exclusively male; in Britain figure is 11%.

The executive secretary of the Academy of Sciences, Lilliam Àlvarez Diaz, attributes these achievements to the principles of social inclusion and gender equality established during and after the Cuban revolution. It began in 1961 with a literacy campaign, followed by an education policy which made all levels of education free, and which gave girls and women the opportunity to pursue professional goals. This followed Lenin's precept that no revolution is possible without the participation of women.

Women and agriculture

Cuba imports 60% of its food. Due to the US blockade, which was tightened under Trump, and has continued under the Biden administration, and due also to the lack of hard currency caused by the impact of the Covid pandemic on the tourist industry, there is a huge ongoing effort to increase domestic food production; but this must be done within the Tarea Vida plan, which calls for agricultural practices to be adapted to prevent further damage to the environment.

Cuba's agriculture is transitioning to agroecology methods. In 2000, the Local Agricultural Innovation Project (PIAL) was formed to increase food system sustainability and community resilience; it now operates in 75 municipalities across 12 provinces. PIAL works to increase:

- inclusion of women in developing and implementing innovative agricultural practices;
- self-confidence for female farmers;
- productive diversification on family farms; and
- employment and household income through women-led micro-industry projects.

PIAL draws on the expertise and resources of formal research institutes to support locally focused participatory initiatives. It has a national coordinator responsible for gender-specific strategies, and for building rural women's capacity to engage in agricultural innovation and leadership.

It should also be noted that the mass organisation which represents small private farmers, the Association of Small Private Farmers (ANAP), also promotes agroecology, and champions and supports female farmers.

National guidelines were introduced in 2014, drawn up on the basis of theoretical studies, publications, surveys, interviews and meetings across the country, including a workshop entitled 'Gender-sensitive strategies for climate change policies in Cuba'. The document containing the guidelines mentions the contributions of the director of the National Institute of Agricultural Sciences, the director of Projects and Programmes at the Agency for the Environment and the director of PIALs – all these directors are women. The document points out that climate change affects women disproportionately and that involvement of women in facing the challenges of climate change is crucial. It is a long document – in Spanish 72 pages – but its main recommendations relate to ensuring that women have a voice at all levels where decisions are taken to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Green Climate Fund

In April 2021 Cuba won access to almost $24 million from the Green Climate Fund for a coastal resilience project, which supports one area that *Tarea Vida* called *'Mi Costa'* – my coast. It is specifically to support work along 1300 km of coastline across 24 municipalities, and it will contribute to Cuba's efforts in achieving sustainable development goals, helping the country to achieve its commitment to the Paris Agreement. An integral part of Cuba's application for funding was a 'gender action plan', which includes specific training for women, employment opportunities as a result of the project, women's participation in monitoring progress, training in hydrological modelling and data management, and participating in decision-making forums.

Cuba's efforts to implement its *Tarea Vida* plan are being carried out in the context of the 60-year long financial, economic and commercial blockade imposed upon Cuba by the United States. It impacts on Cuba's approach to realise its plans for climate change mitigation, as well as making life generally more difficult for women as mothers, daughters, partners, and workers.

WOMEN AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Equal pay and equality bargaining

Heather Wakefield

I'm going to talk in general about the challenges facing women workers and then specifically about our ongoing struggle for equal pay. I think the *Charter for Women* is a really great initiative and it took me straight back to the *Working Women's Charter* of 1974. As a NALGO activist in the 1970s, I was involved in the *Working Women's Charter* campaign then, for many of the things that are in the *Charter for Women* today. So, we have come somewhere, but not far enough.

The *Charter* has never really been needed more. Privatisation, austerity, Covid and Brexit are all impacting negatively on women workers; and, of course, we all know that we are in the grip of the Tory Government, that shows no signs of even recognising women, let alone doing anything to promote women's rights. We should remember there is a forthcoming Employment Bill in the autumn, about which we know very little; but it is really important that we, our unions and our political organisations push hard for what women need in that Bill.

Cameron and Osborne's austerity had a massive impact on parts of the public sector, with a million jobs gone in local government. Half the central government budget to local authorities has been cut, so key services for women and children – like Sure Start, libraries, street lighting for safety, services that children need, and youth services – have been decimated.

The gender pay gap – the gap between men's and women's earnings – has grown massively as a result of austerity. I was involved at Greenwich University, doing research and a report called *Closing the Gender Pay Gap in Public Services in the Context of Austerity*.[1] It showed that in 2018 the UK had the highest gender pay gap in Europe at 21.5%, compared with 12% in Germany and Denmark, and 9% in Sweden. The Fawcett Society reckons that it will take 100 years to close the gap unless there is action on equal pay; and the World Economic Forum reckons it will take 253 years to close the global gender pay gap. So, we have a big job on our hands.

As a result of Covid we have seen pregnant women being unprotected by health and safety legislation, deprived of furlough and made redundant on a scale that is scary. I know this from my role at Maternity Action. We have also seen women taking on more childcare and domestic labour than men, while working at home; and a massive rise in domestic violence. Privatisation, which affects women particularly, has risen.

The number of Black and ethnic minority women workers went down by 17% between the third quarters of 2019 and 2020, compared with 1% for White women; and all the evidence shows that Black women have been hit hardest by the pandemic. Shockingly, 70% of women with caring responsibility for children or other family members, who asked for furlough during the pandemic this year, were refused; and 46% of women who have been made redundant because of the pandemic say that it is because of inadequate childcare facilities.

Brexit could well leave women much more vulnerable, because so many of our employment rights – like maternity rights, equal pay and part-time workers' rights – are derived from EU legislation and case law.

There are some important equal pay developments at the moment. You may have seen the mass litigation that is going on in some of the supermarkets, where women on the shop floor are comparing themselves for equal pay with men working in the warehouses. Because the law is so complicated, the case has been running for a number of years; but there has been a recent judgement that the shop floor/warehouse comparison is legitimate.

In the public sector we have Agenda for Change in the NHS, and Single Status in local government, which have established pay systems based on equal pay through job evaluation schemes. In the civil service there has been some brilliant work done by Prospect since 2001, when they won a case called Cadman; by means of litigation, industrial action and collective bargaining, they have had fantastic success in getting equal pay for women.

We do have gender pay gap reporting now, but there is no requirement for employers to devise statutory action plans to close the gap. Also, there are many flaws in the system, one of the biggest being that employers do not have to include in their reports all the workers whose jobs have been outsourced. So, all those women doing catering, cleaning and care work for private contractors in public services, and who are generally on very low pay, are not included in the reports, so that the reported gap is much less than the real one.

However, as I found out from the research I did with Greenwich University, we are miles ahead of most other European states in this area. With two other trade union institutes in Italy and Slovakia, we went looking for trade union initiatives to close the gender pay gap across Europe. Although there was a lot of stuff going on with regard to low pay, and women's low pay, it was very hard to find any examples of trade union action on equal pay; in fact, there was a very marked lack of knowledge about equal pay legislation in their own countries or the EU, which made me realise that the EU had not done a job in promoting the equal pay legislation.

There is no requirement under UK equal pay legislation, which is part of the 2010 Equality Act, for employers to actively implement the equal pay law. Unless women take cases, or trade unions challenge unequal pay, there's no onus on the employers to do anything about it. In the private sector there has been almost no action whatsoever on equal pay. There are huge backlogs in employment tribunal cases, which take years because our equal pay law is simply not fit for purpose and allows the employers so many opportunities to challenge the claims.

The 1919 Treaty of Versailles which followed the First World War established the rights of women to equal pay for work of equal value, saying:

"The following seems to be of special and urgent

importance: the principle that men and women should receive equal remuneration for work of equal value."

In 1948 the UN Declaration of Human Rights said the same thing. In 1951 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention also included the right to equal pay for work of equal value, as did the founding treaty of the European Union, the Treaty of Rome, in 1957. And then of course, in 1970, following the amazing Ford women's strike, we got the Equal Pay Act in the UK, which didn't come into force until 1975, and which was amended in 1983 to include equal pay for work of equal value, after the European Union had to take the UK Government to court for not doing so.

We have had this right for an awful long time, and we need to be doing more. We must campaign for the law to be changed so that:

- groups of women can bring class action suits to make single equal pay claims;
- equal pay audits are statutory, with a stronger duty on employers to comply with the law and act on it;
- the race pay gap is tackled alongside the gender pay gap, which is a double whammy for Black women;
- women whose jobs have been privatised are allowed to compare themselves with men who remain within the public service concerned;
- women's pay is required to be levelled up to men's pay when women win cases – at the moment, men's pay, such as local government bonuses, can be cut;
- the criteria for what are acceptable in job evaluation schemes are changed so that key aspects of women's work, like responsibility for people, emotional demands and so on, are reflected in them; and
- there is faster access to justice, with better-trained tribunals.

Trade unions also need to change their priorities and put equal pay and women's workplace demands at the top of their political lobbying, policy and bargaining agendas, particularly in those women-dominated unions in the public sector and elsewhere. Every union should draw up its own plan for how it is going to achieve equal pay for women, with strong and committed equal pay champions responsible for those plans, in conjunction with their women's committees and women's officers; and should also have a unit or section with enhanced expertise on equal pay, the law on job evaluation, workforce analysis, pay analysis and so on. In addition, we need massive training programmes, for activists and paid officials on the law and how to bargain for equal pay, and for women members because they are largely unaware of their rights.

And last but not least, we need to really raise our game within the women's movement on equal pay and political parties. We must link up with international campaigns like EPIC, the Equal Pay International Coalition, in which the ILO, the UN and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development participate. And, since Wales and Scotland have committed to integrating the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) into their domestic law, we need to press the UK government to do the same.

Notes and References

1 https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/GPGreport.pdf.

Making the labour movement more representative of women

Annette Mansell-Green

I am delighted to have been asked to contribute to what has been a brilliant day of discussion and debate and, hopefully, a catalyst for progressive change for women.

We are using the *Charter for Women* as our framework for discussion of how we bring about progressive change for women in society, at work and in the labour movement. We know that there have been prominent individual women, and women coming together collectively in high-profile struggles, from the Matchwomen's dispute in 1888 through the Chainmakers' dispute in 1910 – which was probably the first successful equal pay dispute – to the Ford machinists, the women supporting the miners in the 1980s and, recently, the women in Glasgow and Birmingham local authorities. So why is it that our movement is still so heavily dominated by men in leadership positions?

There are of course many reasons for this: political, social, historical, and simple patriarchy; and, of course, becoming a trade union leader demands time – a commodity in short supply for many women. Practices such as forcing women to leave employment when they got married were among other barriers to involvement, historically. So where are we today? How far have we come? In my 40-odd years of involvement, I have sometimes felt that we have taken two steps forward and then one step back.

The most recent TUC equality audit shows that women are more likely to be union members than men today. In 2018, women made up 49.5% of UK employees (I notice that the TUC uses the term employees, rather than workers, and I wonder whether that figure would be different if they used the latter). Women's union density is 25.6% compared with 20.9% for men, and is in fact highest for professional occupations, with 53% being union members.

However, far too many women workers are under-represented: part-time and temporary workers, and those in caring, leisure and service occupations, where there is very low membership. It is even worse for sales, customer services and so-called elementary occupations.

A lot of women are in precarious employment, zero-hours contracts etc; and many have multiple part-time jobs, making it very difficult, though not impossible, to organise them.

Nevertheless, women still do outnumber men in trade union membership, leading us to the only conclusion that our movement is unrepresentative. Mary Davis said in her contribution that "the super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is fundamental to the maintenance of capitalism." But despite this super-exploitation, we are largely represented by men.

Men control the means of production, but we can't achieve effective progressive change unless women are

leading the struggle to rid us of oppression, and that means leading the trade union and labour movement. So, as the *Charter* states, first we have to tackle the under-representation of women in our movement and its structures. We need to bring back proper and effective education for women workers, lifelong learning programmes that include political education and organising skills – programmes that empower women.

As part of my varied and sometimes chequered trade union history and experience, one of the most wonderful things that I ever got involved with, as chair of Unison's education committee, was attending events to award certificates to mainly low-paid women, who had progressed through the union's 'Return to Learn' programme. Through agreements with employers, this programme gave women time off from work – personal study time and residential time – to improve basic skills and to go on to further and higher education.

There was one occasion that still makes me quite emotional when I think about it. A particular woman had been a cleaner in Wolverhampton Council, had brought her family up, suffered abuse as a child, had a very difficult background and had been prevented from pursuing any further education due to becoming pregnant and then being in an abusive relationship. She was a highly intelligent, highly articulate woman who joined 'Return to Learn'. Following that she gained a place on a degree in sociology at Wolverhampton University and came back to speak to us, to thank us and her union for giving her that space and opportunity to study and to take up that place at university. It was one of the most moving moments that I have ever experienced.

We should be giving such opportunities to all women workers. In fact, any woman in society should have those opportunities, wherever they work and however old they are. We also need to bring these empowered women into activism, but for that we need our trade union movement to be welcoming, inclusive and a safe space.

Last year, we saw a significant and important moment in one of our larger unions. Following complaints made by women to the president of the GMB, an independent inquiry into allegations of sexual harassment and bullying was commissioned from Karen Monaghan QC; and the general secretary decided it was best for him to step down at that moment.

The report's executive summary begins with "The GMB is institutionally sexist" – no beating about the bush there. It goes on to say, "The general secretaries and all regional secretaries are and have always been men." Further, it states that branches are male-dominated with limited female participation, and that they are often organised in a way that deters women members' participation.

I applaud the GMB for putting this report in the public domain, for accepting the recommendations, and also for taking action to make significant cultural and structural change. It should not have taken these complaints for something to be done, but at least it is happening now, and we can all learn from it.

Any change must include organising, enabling and supporting women to take their place at the table and into positions of senior leadership.

How many of us in the movement have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment and institutional sexism? How many women have been put off activism because of it? The report sent a momentary shock wave through the wider movement and the TUC; and the response has been for the TUC Executive to set up a working party to devise both a strategy, and support and guidance for affiliates who feel that they too need to make some changes.

As a member of the TUC Women's Committee, I can assure you that we shall be watching every step of this working party and making sure that it comes up with some proper recommendations that are taken up by all affiliates. There isn't an affiliate that doesn't need it. What we need is a root-and-branch examination of structures, how we organise and how we prioritise the issues that are important to women workers, which in turn will bring about progressive change.

At the TUC Women's Conference this year, there was a fantastic agenda, sadly none of which was debated due to the online nature of the event. However, one motion from the NEU stood out for me, and this was entitled 'Women Leading the Union'. It called for an audit of the representation of women in all decision-making positions in their unions, for robust anti-sexist and anti-racist measures to be put in place across the movement, and for the Women's Committee to promote the contributions made by women delegates at Congress and to draw upon success stories of structural change to ensure that women's voices are heard here and across the movement. Bravo, NEU! Anybody would think they had read our *Charter*.

Women's structures and self-organised groups are vital if we are to move our progressive struggle forward. But are they the whole answer? At its inception in 1993, Unison set up self-organised group structures, and it was a worthy effort, but I am not sure that they achieved what they set out to do. How many women who joined these structures have moved into positions of leadership? How many have made way for new younger women to come on board? Not many. The structures have become an entity and an end in themselves, and not a means to an end.

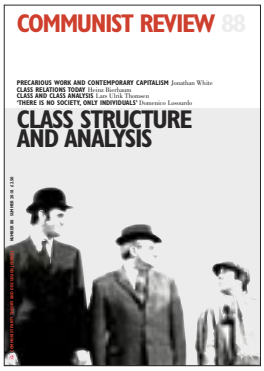
We need our structures to be places where we mentor, support, encourage and educate; but they should not be separate from the boys' room entirely. They should be where we discuss, decide and activate, where we grow our leaders, where we set the agenda.

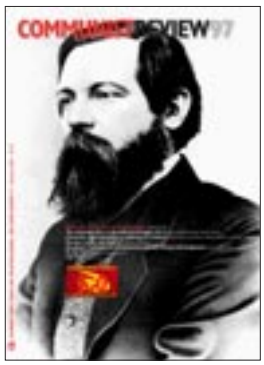
The TUC's, STUC's and Wales TUC's women's conferences are our parliaments of women, and we must guard them with our lives. We must see off any threats to their existence or their effectiveness. We need to continue to attend, participate and use these platforms, to debate those issues that are important to us; but we must also insist that decisions taken at the conferences are enacted and that we have a loud voice at the main Congress events.

Finally, the *Charter for Women* is a vital tool, so go out and promote it, use it, adopt it. As a movement, we must encourage women, never pull up the ladder.

Remember, there can be no change without women; and, as Mary Davis also said, "the price of our liberation is eternal vigilance in defending our theory and practice."

COMMUNIST PARTY THEORY AND DISCUSSION JOURNAL COMMUNIST REVIEW





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THE WOMEN OF THE PARIS COMMUNE AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR TODAY

The Commune is woman

Lydia Samarbakhsh

French Communist Party

The sisterhood movement that is leading the international political and social struggles in each of our countries is undoubtedly making an important contribution to a new page of internationalism.

Since the emergence in 2007 of the #MeTOO movement, a real groundswell has taken hold across continents, leading an offensive which opposes violence against women, against inequalities between men and women and against the unbearable patriarchy that finds a catalytic effect in capitalist domination and exploitation. For us Communists this transformative struggle is an essential dimension of the fight for emancipation.

This dimension is part of a long history, that of the workers' and people's movement which, in France, is rooted in the peasant and pre-industrial revolts from the time of the Renaissance, and during successive centuries when the *Ancien Régime* was being chipped away and eroded. Those were times when women were "not just participants in the movement, but also leaders"[1] of various uprisings. The same is true of the Paris Commune, whose 150th anniversary we celebrate this year.

As Michèle Audin has written, "The Commune is woman",[2] and it is indeed under these features that the contemporary artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest has represented it.[3]

It is woman because, from the first to the last day of the Commune, women were not just a popular movement but formed a mass movement, whether their names have been forgotten or whether – like Louise Michel, one of its main incarnations – they are known and recognised as *communardes*, women members of the Commune. The part played by women in this historical experience, although spontaneous and at times improvised,[4] was significant and crucial.[5]

Indeed, not only were the *communardes* engaged in action, they often sparked it. In that they extended the line of the women who gave the Revolution of 1789 its political character of abolishing privileges; of those who were at the start of the insurrections of 1793 (to save 'the Republic in danger') and 1795 ('for bread and the return to the Constitution of Year I'); and still those of the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, in which some of the communardes had participated.

At each stage of this long and slow historical revolutionary process in France, women imposed themselves as political actors, even though their political rights were not recognised, including by their own comrades. Even vis-à-vis those of the same beliefs, it was a matter of not allowing themselves to be locked into the ideological straitjacket of the role of 'reproducer', remaining cloistered at home, as passive recipients of the events which surrounded them. Although they did not have the right to vote and had no right of representation, as they could not be elected, they were nevertheless entrusted by the Commune with leading responsibilities of strategic significance.

In Paris, in 1870-71, there were 62,000 women in the working-class neighbourhoods and suburbs, who made up more than half of the 114,000 workers. These women workers represented the majority of the mobilised women. They wanted to be mobilised, because they had aspirations affecting not only their own conditions but also the dynamics, social logic and meaning of the society in which the workers lived and the new society that the revolutionary movement was seeking to bring into being.

Women suffered more than men from the stigma of class contempt – that is still true today. A crowd of women in struggle, *a fortiori* women of the popular classes, will for a long time be considered by the bourgeoisie and the dominant classes as a crowd which is more unkempt, dangerous and threatening to order and power. And this stigma regularly transcends class affiliations or political camps; it was seen, for example, with Proudhon, who went to the point of summoning mathematics to adorn his misogynistic conceptions with an alleged scientific varnish.

By wanting to break, in one go, with the logic of the bosses' domination at work and the male domination in the family and social relations, the *communardes* gave the Commune its full revolutionary dimension and its true democratic, social, secular, egalitarian and internationalist character.

On 11 April 1871, Nathalie Le Mel[6] and Elisabeth Dmitrieff, who helped launch the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and the Care of the Wounded, summarised their revolutionary aims as follows:

> "We want work so that we can keep the profit. We do not want any more exploiters, any more masters."

From 4 September 1870, when the Republic was proclaimed, women were mobilised, in the same way as men, for the defence of Paris, France and the Republic. They went on to defend the cannons that the Versaillais wanted to steal from the Parisians; they marched on Versailles as President Adolphe Thiers fled, in the same way as Louis XVI had done; and from 8 September, they were fighting on the barricades, just as in the rear they were working round the clock, helping with caring, ensuring provisions were available, participating in the rallies, processions, meetings, popular assemblies and the sections of the Internationale, where they spoke and debated as equals to the men.

Like their elders of 1793, they intended to be citizens with full rights: they wanted to see the establishment of new and fundamental rights – the great social rights which are still today the basis of the social demands of working women and men. Similarly, they wanted to win and obtain respect for their total economic independence (they were then paid half as much as men) and social independence (the right to divorce and recognition of common law unions).

They demanded the separation of church and state; they

organised the replacement of the religious orders in hospitals and schools; and they even created schools for girls, thus guaranteeing their access to education as a universal but also fundamental right.

They made the improvement in their living standards and working conditions, and the recognition of their place in society, into levers for social transformation and human emancipation, opening the possibility of a classless society. At the launch of the Women's Union they proclaimed:

> "Inequality and antagonism between the sexes constitute one of the bases of the power of the governing classes".[7]

This is why they paid so dearly for their decisive contribution. During the *Semaine sanglante* (Bloody Week) which ended the Commune, and throughout the years of repression which followed, women suffered equally with men in the rampage of violence which befell them: they were the dead and the wounded, raped, imprisoned, executed, exiled or sent to prison.

The *communardes* led the political fight with great lucidity, fully aware of the obstacles they faced. One of them, André Léo (real name Léodile Champeix), who, along with Louise Michel, led the demonstrations of 8 September 1871 demanding arms to fight the Prussians, had written on 8 May 1871:

> "We need to reason a little: do we believe we can make the revolution without the women? For 80 years now, we have been trying and we have not succeeded. … It is because many republicans have dethroned the emperor and the Good Lord, only to put themselves in their place: they need subjects."[8]

Jean Jaurès, founder and editor of the socialist paper *l'Humanité*, underlined with good reason in an article published on the occasion of the 36th anniversary of the Commune that:

> "It did heroically everything in its power; but history hardly repeats itself. The Commune was born of exceptional circumstances that will not be repeated in their exact form; revolutionary genius is not made of plagiarism, and it is not by slavishly copying its own past that the revolution progresses."[9]

That is why an in-depth study, a critical analysis, of these 72 exceptional days of the 'March Revolution of 1871' and of the political role the *communardes* played, does not deliver 'lessons to be learned' or timeless or absolute formulas to be implemented. On the contrary, it constitutes an invitation to 'invent the unknown' – and this is why we can speak of inspiration, as Karl Marx stated very early on:

> "The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. … They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending …, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and themselves. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant."[10]

That is why the mobilisation of the *communardes*, and the mobilisation of women this century against all forms of domination and exploitation, constitute, for us Communists, the "elements of the new society" whose liberation was initiated in a decisive way, by the emancipation of the forces of labour and of creation, to overcome and eventually defeat the capitalist system.

■ Translated by Mary Adossides, with additional notes provided by the Editor. Originally published, without end-notes, in the *Morning Star* on 15/16 May 2021.

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3 A poster specifically designed for the 150th anniversary: see https://www.commune1871.org/nos-actualites/vie-de-l-association/1136-agenda-2021-du-150e-anniversaire-de-la-commune –*Ed.*
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5 Although long neglected by 'classical' historians until the emergence of Marxist historical schools.
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SISTERHOOD, SOCIALISM AND STRUGGLE

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FRAN LOCK

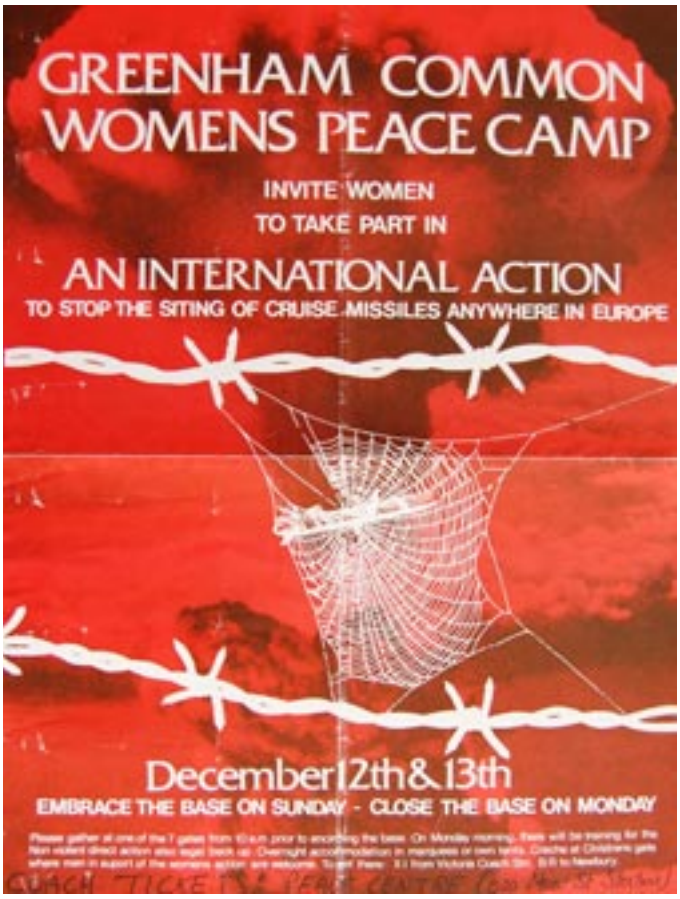
SISTERHOOD, SOCIALISM, AND STRUGGLE: POETRY AND THE WORK OF SOLIDARITY

Our radical activist foresisters

As I sit down to write this column, the 40th anniversary of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp is fast approaching. Hundreds of women are planning to retrace the 130-mile march from Cardiff to Greenham, in order to honour the legacy of those who founded the camp, and who spearheaded one of the biggest – certainly one of the most culturally conspicuous – women-led protests in the UK since the campaign for women's suffrage. A number of discussions surrounding the march have framed it as an act of solidarity with both our radical activist foresisters, and with women living under conditions of armed occupation, conflict, and the threat of war globally. The anniversary provides an opportunity to reaffirm the aims and objectives of the original camp, the ultimate goal of which was not only the removal of missile silos from Greenham Common, but a radical dismantling of the military-industrial complex worldwide.

While this last ambition remains unrealised, the legacy of the Greenham Peace Camp has continued to serve as an inspiration to future generations of activists and artists, offering a powerful model for non-violent direct action, and for collective creativity. From the earliest months of the camp, the women at Greenham Common produced their own newsletters, booklets and broadsides, incorporating and merging an array of forms from analysis to anecdote, sketches, songs, drawings and poetry. These publications served a variety of purposes, both inward- and outward-facing: to circulate information, to generate discussion into demands and tactics, and to persuade and inspire new participants. These various projects also provided the women with an opportunity for creative expression often lacking within other contexts. They situated and prioritised the women as a cohort of thinkers, artists and makers, fostering a sense of shared identity.

Poetry was integral to this creative outpouring. One of the most iconic and arresting images to emerge from the camp is *Dancing on Silos* by Rassia Page. The photograph features a ring of women in silhouette, holding hands and swaying on top of the missile silos, while two police cars idle ominously in the foreground, and a cordon of barbed wire stretches off beyond the edges of the image. Page's poster appeared in *City Limits* magazine, with the poem *Life Against Death* by Dinah Livingstone superimposed onto the picture. The poem juxtaposes the prosaic details of camp life – "soggy sandwiches, brandy, ox tail soup" – against the



enormity of the threat of nuclear war – "seeds of destruction whose sorrowful journey/ is speedy doomsday". Faced with the might of the military-industrial complex, the women in the poem appear immensely vulnerable; and yet it is the "uneasy personnel" in "sinister looking vehicles" who are "protecting themselves from the women". Livingstone's poem contextualises Page's photograph, offering a visceral and immediate insight into what it was like to be at the camp and exactly what was at stake for the women in protesting. It communicates both the shared vulnerability and the collective political power of the protestors in a way that straightforward reportage may have struggled to articulate.

Women and war

Throughout history, women and girls have suffered – and continue to suffer – disproportionately at the hands of the military-industrial complex. The experience of women during and in the aftermath of war is particularly grim: existing inequalities are magnified, as social institutions break down, rendering them ever more vulnerable to numerous forms of exploitation. Among the most traumatic of these is sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, which have profound and long-lasting psychosocial consequences. Other gendered effects include the recruitment of girls as child soldiers, girls and women becoming internally and externally displaced refugees, and the collapse of public health services rendering reproductive health care inadequate or unavailable.

Because of the central role of women in maintaining the fabric of family and community through times of war, they become tactical targets of some significance during armed conflict. Owing to their unequal status within the majority of patriarchal societies, women and girls of all ages share a uniquely sharp experience of displacement, loss of home and property, the involuntary disappearance of relatives, poverty, rape, sexual and other forms of slavery, and sexual abuse – all while their responsibilities toward family and community remain formidable. Armed occupation and economic sanctions hit women hardest, while their gendered suffering is symbolically deployed as the justification for both these strategies.

These issues have been on my mind of late. With the Taliban now firmly in control of Afghanistan, the immediate future for women and girls in that country appears monumentally bleak. This bleakness is not unfamiliar. Following the overthrow of the People's Democratic Party government of Afghanistan in 1992 by the western-backed mujahideen, the situation for women and girls in the region deteriorated rapidly: treated as second-class citizens by successive regimes, women continue to be the foremost victims of Western aggression.

This bleakness has always been with us, across the globe and throughout recorded history, in Western Europe past and present, as well as in the Middle East. Talk on social media turns on the need for feminist solidarity with the women of Afghanistan, but what does that look like? And how do we meaningfully and practically manifest this solidarity through cultural activity? In broad-left discourse, the notion of solidarity is everywhere invoked, but what do we actually mean when we use that word? And how might we achieve a measure of it through poetry?

These are big questions, without one single easy answer, although every so often I am fortunate enough to glimpse a possible route through the fog. For example, I have recently completed a project, working with Hari Rajaledchumy, for the Poetry Translation Centre, to translate into English a collection of poems by the Sri Lankan Tamil poet Anar. She was born in 1974 in eastern Sri Lanka, and her early childhood was marked by intense outbreaks of ethnic violence that would later push the country into civil war. During this period education was not considered a priority for women and girls in general, and for the daughters of orthodox Muslim households in particular.

Anar's own education was interrupted when her home town of Sainthamaruthu was caught up in the chaos of the Indian Peace Keeping Force's withdrawal from the region. Her family's attempts to obtain the necessary paperwork for her to sit her 'O' Level exams were consistently thwarted by military-imposed curfews and civic disarray. As a result, her schooling stopped, and she became confined to her home from the age of 16. Throughout these difficult and precarious years Anar's one outlet was the radio, on which she would listen to poetry being recited. It stirred something in her, and eventually she began to work in secret on poems of her own, submitting her work under pseudonyms, gathering inspiration and encouragement from an emerging cohort of writers.

It was important to talk a little about Anar's life and work in the context of 'sisterhood', because it offers proof, if any were needed, that the oppression of women and girls is a global continuum. How many girls like Anar are now living in Afghanistan? Or in Palestine? How many girls throughout the world and throughout history? It is enough to make your head spin.

I also wanted to share something of Anar's story because it speaks very specifically to poetry: what it can do for us, and what we can do – through poetry – for each other. It speaks to the idea of solidarity, and how this might be forged and encountered on the space of the page and within the breath of the poem. To talk about this, I'm going to invoke one of feminism's most radical and compassionate foresisters, the Black lesbian activist and poet, Audre Lorde.

A communion of compassionate subjects

Lorde insisted throughout her life as a writer, thinker, and political activist upon sustained attention to the granular particularities of women's experience, and upon the recognition of "the fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic".[1] It is a demand for otherness and diversity of voice within activist cohorts and within art and poetry as a precursor to radical change, and it stands in defiance to the homogenising inclination of mainstream White feminism, which used a White, Western subject-position unreflectively as a model for all human experience.

Crucially, this does not mean that Lorde foresaw feminism's collapse into a morass of oppositional interests, but rather that she dared to envisage feminism as a network of varied experiences and positions, coalescing around the common goal of liberation for all women. Lorde's writing about her own struggle with illness is telling in this regard:

> "The women who sustained me [...] were Black and White, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They gave me strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge – within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not – I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior."[2]

Lorde's suffering becomes an occasion for discovery, a kind of self-revelation within a community of female fellow sufferers, a communion of compassionate subjects. To speak and act out of our experience of suffering, acknowledging that this is something we share – this is the measure of true solidarity.

From casualty to warrior

Which is all well and good, but how do we transform this feeling from a vague rhetorical gesture into meaningful practical action? How do we move – in Lorde's words – from casualty to warrior? This is a timely and pressing question. Via social media, I and a Palestinian friend got into conversation about how 'solidarity' had become the left-wing equivalent to the Christian right's familiar 'thoughts and prayers', aimed in the general direction of any person or group experiencing hardship, as a substitute for actually having to do anything. 'Solidarity' as a noun, my friend said, is no use to anyone. For solidarity to be meaningful, to be worthy of the name, it has to be a verb.

And for poetry this raises a difficulty. In recent history, at least in the West, poets have not had a great deal of political or economic power. We cannot impose sanctions or meaningfully withdraw our labour. Our work is largely solitary, our wider 'communities' disparate and scattered. If we went on strike nobody would notice or care. Our ability to mobilise and protest effectively is limited. Our field of cultural activity is so specialised, subjective and personal, that we often fail to form recognisable labour cohorts. This is not to say that poets are not politically engaged and active as individuals, but that collectively the pressure we are able to exert is minimal.

Or is it? I find myself returning to the work of Anar, to our translation project, and to the story of Anar's girlhood, listening to poetry on the radio, the volume turned down low to avoid detection. Poetry was not inconsequential for Anar, and the act of writing poetry was not for her an absorbing hobby, but a life-sustaining necessity that grew out of the particular pressured context of a country in tumult. There might have been grave consequences for her daring to write, but she wrote nonetheless, and in turn inspired others. None of this would have been possible had she not apprehended first, through the airwaves, that community of compassionate subjects to which she could aspire and belong. I also find myself thinking that translation at its best can enact a form of reflective solidarity: furthering the reach of voices and experiences that might otherwise have been excluded from national poetic canons. This matters because it allows us to understand ourselves as women as part of a global struggle. It allows us to see each other and ourselves in all our difference and collective strength.

Preservation, relation, radical witnessing

Poetry, and literature more broadly, may also work through archival research to construct counter-narratives, undermining the willed collective amnesia that attends both the history and rights of our most vulnerable and exploited citizens. The University of Glasgow's interdisciplinary centre for the study of historical slavery is a fine example of such a project, but we might also consider the work of Jenny Mitchell, whose previously unpublished poem *Shades of Jamaica* I am sharing today. Mitchell's work combines patient historicity with intense lyric writing (including West Indian dialect) to create a work of preservation, relation and radical imaginative empathy. Her 2019 collection, *Her Lost Language* (Indigo Dreams Publishing), traces the impact of British transatlantic enslavement on Black lives and family dynamics. As Helen Hayes MP has noted of Mitchell's work, her poems "articulate the deep and long-lasting impact of the horrific and shameful history of slavery on individual families, communities and relationships, and especially women."[3]

Clare Shaw, whose poem, *Information for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Rape*, I am also sharing today, has like Mitchell a belief in the power and potential of language, not only to express the self and make sense of the world, but perhaps also to liberate and heal. In this poem, Shaw expands the definition of 'information', embroidering the unadorned rhetoric of the institutional guide, with arresting lyric images, using metaphor and rich figurative language to broach an experience that often feels resistant to articulate disclosure: "There are many reasons/ survivors do not tell," she writes. "Most whale song cannot be heard/ by the human ear, yet it travels for/ ten thousand miles, which is more than/ the world, and it sounds like dreaming." Her poetry is underpinned by her work as a mental health educator; and across both contexts her faith in language – and poetry in particular – as a transformative tool for individuals, communities and societies is paramount. Hearing this poem for the first time, I was reminded of the Adrienne Rich quote that "Every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome."[4] I am also reminded of a quote from Anar that Hari Rajaledchumy shared in the introduction to our translation project: "My poetry is about that fire known as language, which a woman carries under water."

Poetry can offer support and form alliances. It can also be a tool in and of itself. Anthologies in particular create a diverse and intersectional poetic commons. Solidarity, frequently, is less about the noise we make than the space we afford for the stories of others to be heard.

The poems I am presenting today stage an important act of witnessing, offering an opportunity to connect and to be inspired through the empathetic reach and lyric energy of three very different poets who nevertheless share and articulate an experience of oppression as women.

Shades of Jamaica

by Jenny Mitchell

1. negro: dark, sable, dusky

sun licks me in the master's field like fire whipped down by their god my hands are blood
from chopping cane till day turns rock we women in a row all starved to work
the overseer shouts *you slaves are devil made* i the blackest prey beneath him in the dark
he has the nerve to kiss my mouth his skin is shaped like death *black* he calls again
hush said to my child left in the shade with other pickney to grow wild she calls him sir
when she is his still my body smiles to see her cheeny face she'll serve the master
under his red roof like flame i pray he learns her books cave headed girls
who scribe their english words are close to free i pray she sees me wave bent in the crop

2. mulatto: mixed breed; young mule

House maid like it doesn't hurt cleaning all of master's rooms.
Ornate he calls a cuckoo clock, red sofas and a walking stick.

I have to clean ornate with care or feel the stick across my back.
This English man is dirty skinned though money laden.

He has me on my knees to polish marble stairs into a looking glass.
I see my mother's face, too fini-fini though she smiles.

When polishing the banisters, I whisper how he names my legs
good thighs, strong calves. Red meat chopped for his larder

can't breed a child as pale as him. He named her at my breast.
Raised to a dandy girl, serving gift for his new wife.

3. quadroon: a quarter negro; offspring of a mulatto and a white

Preparing mistress for her bed, she cries
Your hands do not look clean when they're scrubbed raw.
I show my palms, begin to brush her hair.
She slaps me hard. I know the reason why.
My shining locks outrank limp curls.
I dare not call the master to be saved.
He always says how beautiful I am.
She takes it out on me when we're alone,
prays for God to save my *half-breed soul.*
I want to scream *a quarter black, no more.*

Article continues over page

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Information for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Rape

by Clare Shaw

Though *sexual abuse takes many forms,*
salmon will find their way home, I have seen them
leaping up falls, there was nothing calm
about them, the current and cold
could not stop them, they were sky-born
and silver. *There are many reasons*

survivors do not tell.
Most whale song cannot be heard
by the human ear, yet it travels for
ten thousand miles, which is more than
the world, and it sounds like dreaming,
like wolf and bird.

Flashbacks are recollections from the past
and in Tromso, the sun will not rise from
November to January.
You may feel you are going crazy
but the worst is over,
and though you are very afraid

when their oxygen tank blew apart
a quarter of a million miles from earth
the crew of Apollo 13 made it back
unharmed. *Remember to breathe.*
The Shaman travels beyond the ordinary
and an animal walks beside you,

you are power
and though *you couldn't remove yourself*
from the situation you were in,
there are 7.422 billion people in the world
and rising, you are not alone.
The sun will not set in Tromso

between May and June
but it's the winter that people love
when the ice glows blue
and the night is a colour of its own.
Sometimes lights will dance in the sky
and though it's minus thirty

it will be enough to warm you,
to sustain you, enough
to convince you to stay.

Killing a Woman

by Anar

Here is a battlefield,
a convenient clinic, a silo
of superabundant supply,
a permanent prison.
Here is a woman's body,
a sacrificial slab.
The heart's ache, the pulse
of life, belongs to us both, but

for women it will not take root.
Before my eyes
my murder is happening.

● Jenny Mitchell's debut collection, *Her Lost Language*, was joint winner of the Geoff Stevens Memorial Prize 2019. Her second collection, *Map of a Plantation*, was published this year. She recently won the Folklore Prize and the Ware Poetry Prize.

● Clare Shaw is a co-director of the Kendal Poetry Festival. She has three poetry collections with Bloodaxe: *Straight Ahead*, *Head On* and *Flood*. The present poem is taken from her forthcoming collection, *Towards a General Theory of Love*, which was awarded a Northern Writer's Award and will be published by Bloodaxe in 2022.

● Anar (Izzat Rehana Mohammed Azeem) is a distinguished voice in the Sri Lankan Tamil poetry scene with five critically acclaimed collections to her name. Her books have won several Sri Lankan and international awards. The present poem is taken from the forthcoming collection *Leaving* (Poetry Translation Centre, 2021), translated by Hari Rajaledchumy and Fran Lock. Hari Rajaledchumy is an artist/writer currently based in London, UK.

Notes and References

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LETTER RESPONSE TO THE KKE

JOHN FOSTER, LIZ PAYNE, KENNY COYLE AND ROB GRIFFITHS

As the authors of the centenary review of our party's international work in *CR*97, pp 14-22, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the Communist Party of Greece, KKE, for their comments printed in CR100, pp 32-3. They are in the tradition of comradely dialogue that is essential for the theoretical vigour of the world Communist movement.

We would also like to reiterate our thanks to the KKE for their outstanding contribution to the world movement. It was the KKE that pressed for the reformation of international organisation in the 1990s and contributed, along with other parties, essential organisational resources for re-establishing it more fully in the following decade. The International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties has played, and continues to play, an indispensable role in enabling theoretical dialogue as well as developing common actions. We honour the KKE for their part.

Equally, we repeat our admiration for the principled and courageous stand of the KKE within Greece – not just at crisis times in the 1940s in face of British government treachery and again in the 1970s in face of the fascist junta but more recently, alone, in leading resistance in Greece to EU membership, to exposing its imperialist character and developing practical mass struggle through PAME and other working-class organisations against it. And even if we did not hold this position, we would not as a party have expressed disagreements in any public forum but only privately. But we had no need to. We honour the KKE for its leadership of the working people of Greece.

We would, however, ask our Greek comrades reconsider some of the points which we made in our general commentary on why the Communist Party of Britain did not join the Communist Pole and why our party considers that some consequential organisational initiatives were unwise.

Our party did not join the European Party of the Left (EPL) for very similar reasons to the KKE. It was designed to integrate Communist parties into the ideology of EU neoliberal reformism and consequently and ultimately imperialism itself.

Yet, as a party, we maintained comradely relations with other parties that did join and with others that took observer status. We did so because of the importance of maintaining solidarity and dialogue and in the knowledge that practical political experience would help determine outcomes. Some parties in the EPL did ultimately take their own decision to exclude themselves from the international communist movement. Not many. Just two or three. But a number of others, major and important parties, revised their assessments and did so in face of practical reality as the character of the EU became clearer in the course of the last two decades and, in doing so, also redeveloped and reaffirmed Leninist principles on imperialism and socialism. In this process dialogue and comradeship with other parties within the International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties [IMCWP] was important and for this reason our party did not favour the tactics of supporting splinter fractions in those countries.

We also ask the KKE to consider whether it has given sufficient weight to the particular circumstances of different countries, of their specific trajectories for progress towards socialism, and the importance of mutual learning on this front also.

The KKE has in the past been publicly critical of our own party for its strategy of working within Britain's established trade union movement – rather than establishing separate structures. Our strategy on this front in fact goes back to the founding of our party in 1920.

As is well known, Lenin himself entered this debate. But the decision of our comrades at this founding Congress was based on a generation of prior experience and a knowledge of the unique character of Britain's labour movement.

Britain's national trade union structures were not, as was generally the case elsewhere, established separately by social democratic, Christian democratic and/or Marxist political parties. They were established independently of political organisations. These unions had long before created their own confederation, the Trades Union Congress. It was the TUC that then established the Labour Party as a federal party representing all political trends – with the vote moved in 1899 by a member of the Marxist party that in 1920 formed the political core of the new Communist Party. By 1920 members of the new Communist Party were leading two of the major unions, the Transport Workers' Federation and the Engineers. Close allies led the Miners' Federation.

The strategy of those who formed the Communist Party in 1920, and its predecessor organisations, had been to develop mass rank-and-file organisations, local and regional shop stewards' movements, that worked within the existing trade union structures politically in order to contain and defeat right-wing, collaborationist elements. It was thanks to this strategy in 1920 that the British Trades Union Congress, and then the Labour Party itself, was won to call a General Strike which successfully halted further British military action against Soviet Russia.

In subsequent years departures by our Party from this strategic position, particularly in 1928-1932, were assessed as weakening, not strengthening, the mass influence of the Communist Party within the working-class movement.

British Communists understand the quite different circumstances of our comrades in Greece – and also in other countries across the world, from China to Cuba and Venezuela. However, we believe that each party has to form policy, tactically and strategically, in terms of its own specific national circumstances – always, however, doing so as Communists maintaining the same ultimate goal of uniting working people and their allies for the overthrow of capitalist state power and developing the social and material base for socialism.

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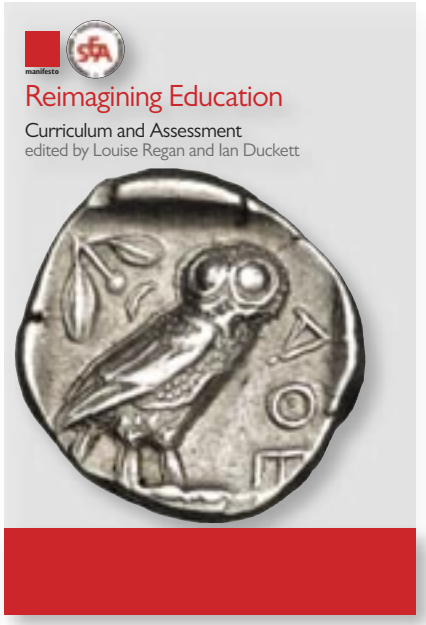

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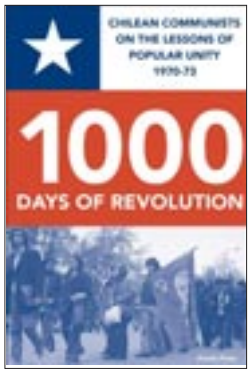

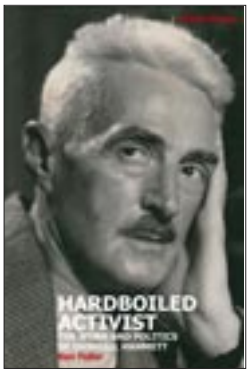

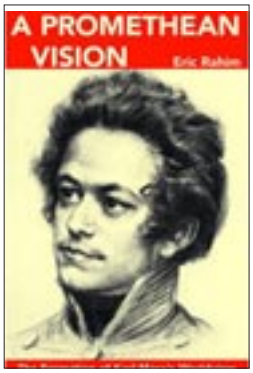

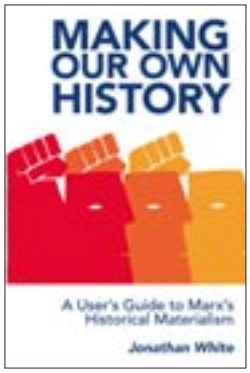

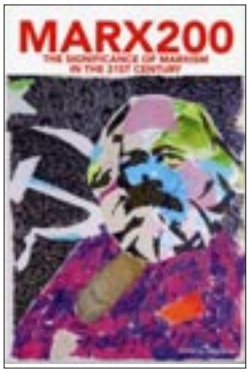

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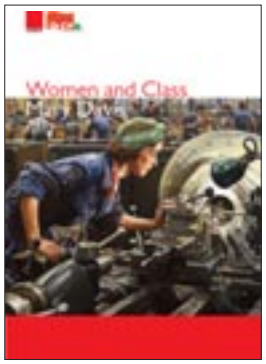

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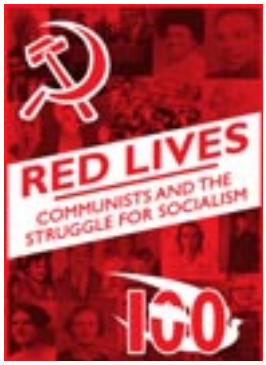

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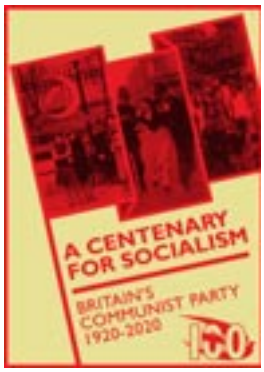

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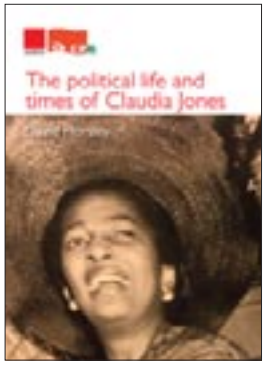

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