

WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

THE POLISH WOMEN'S STRIKE

MUMS UNDER LOCKDOWN

THE CASE FOR A FOUR DAY WEEK

WOMEN OF THE POPLAR REBELLION

RENT STRIKES

ORGANISING TENANTS

THE PARIS COMMUNE &
UNION DES FEMMES

and more!

MY BODY
MY CHOICE
MY ABORTION

Women's Fightback is a socialist feminist publication produced by Workers' Liberty.

If you are interested in writing for *Women's Fightback*, wish to respond to any of the articles in this edition, or would like to contact us for any other reason, you can find us at:

womensfightback@workersliberty.org

workersliberty

workersliberty

workersliberty

Thanks to Feminist Collages London, for giving us permission to use their photos (cover and p.10). Feminist Collages are a London-based intersectional feminist collective. The collective originated as a branch of the now-global "Collages Féministes" movement, created in Paris in August 2019.

feminist_collages_london

feminist_c_l

Feminist Collages London



STRAJK!

An interview with Ewa Pospieszynska,
abortion rights and Razem activist.

On 27th January, a near-total ban on abortion came into effect across Poland, three months after a ruling by the country's constitutional court. Poland already had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, but the new law - which removed severe foetal abnormalities from the list of exemptions - was seen as totemic, and part of a more generalised assault by the ruling Law and Justice Party (or PiS - short for Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) against Poland's democratic institutions and minorities. In response to it, over the course of October and November, gigantic demonstrations gripped the country, shutting down many towns and cities and, maybe, creating the basis for a renaissance for left wing movements and feminism in Poland. *Women's Fightback* spoke to Ewa Pospieszynska, an abortion rights activist based in between Warsaw and her hometown Gostynin.

Like many European migrants living in the UK, Ewa moved back to Poland in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, after four years of studying at the University of Surrey and LSE. "Almost immediately", she says, "I started to feel quite weird here because I realised how radical my views are now, in comparison to the people around me - not only my family and people in my hometown, which I knew were quite conservative, but also in Warsaw. My friends suddenly seemed so conservative; or, rather, I seemed very radical to them." The experience of coming home confirmed to her that what was needed was not a careful defence of the existing, very restrictive, laws on abortion, but a much broader and more radical campaign, "some kind of movement that would start shifting those ideas."

Then, on October 22nd 2020, came the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, a body almost entirely composed of judges nominated by the PiS government since the constitutional crisis of 2015. "When the judgement happened, I was in Warsaw," remembers Ewa. "I felt like something kind of crumbled. People started to realise that this was only the beginning. More and more their rights and freedoms would be taken away."

The ruling was not the first time that PiS had attempted to change the law: four years earlier, parliament had voted down an attempt at the same law change after 'Black Friday' protests kicked off across the country. Since then, women's rights organisations have been subjected to raids and repression by the state, and those parts of civil society offering basic support to vulnerable women have had their funding switched off. LGBT rights activists have continued to wage a constant campaign against a government which talks openly about the dangers of "LGBT ideology" and "genderism"; across much of Poland, local authorities are now declaring themselves 'LGBT free zones'. Then there was the response to the government's stacking of the Constitutional Court in 2015, which saw large scale protests.

At last, in October 2020, the movements came to life with a new force through the prism of opposing the abortion ban. "What you could see was a new spirit of solidarity," says Ewa. "There was a spontaneous protest in front of the house of Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, in Żoliborz, a district of Warsaw. It was very spontaneous without any serious organisation behind it, just some social media posts that had started to spread." By the following day, the protests had become more organised, as the infrastructure of the movement which started in 2016 - Strajk Kobiet, or Women's Strike - started to kick in. The scale and energy of the protest shocked everyone. "There was singing and shouting of the slogans, thousands of people marching together; a lot of young people, men as well", she says. "At that moment, I really felt like - wow! - something might change. The whole of October and November was like that". The protests were, by some way, the biggest since the fall of Communism in 1989. By the end of the month, many hundreds of thousands of Poles had taken to the streets across more than 400 locations, and they rolled on for a whole month longer.

BARRIERS AND DIVISIONS

The protests faced a number of immediate difficulties, most obviously the level of police repression on display. "Already, on that first day," says Ewa, "the police came in

huge numbers and used pepper gas. It was violent - and this sparked even more anger." As the protests continued the state repression intensified, and, while, as in almost all mass protest movements the violence mobilised sympathy and determination in the short term ("it was a motivation to continue and not let them crush us"), it inevitably took its toll later on. At the time of our interview in mid-February 2021, says Ewa, "there's a case happening in a town quite close to me: three activists are accused of 'offending religious feelings'. The activists put up some posters and stickers with a picture of the Virgin Mary and the LGBTQ flag - very harmless! It tried to show the hypocrisy of the church, which claims to be open to everyone, but is still very offended by the LGBT flag." There was a solidarity demonstration planned at the court on the day we spoke, and, she says, people are still following events and trying to coordinate solidarity for those facing prosecution. Wary of state surveillance, the movement has turned to encoded apps Telegram and Signal to organise, and in a country whose human rights record - and constitutional irregularities - are the subject of constant criticism by the European Union, there is newfound sense of fragility to the right to dissent.

The other immediate difficulty is the degree to which the movement is divided over its aims and demands. "At the beginning many different people came together, but they were still from very different sides", Ewa says. "Some would support going back to the so-called compromise [the situation before the latest court ruling; still the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe]. Others wanted abortion in any case. I would say that the latter group was bigger - but it wasn't everyone." There is a constant tension between radicals and moderates in the movement, she says, and that extends to tactics as well: "When we started to target the churches and there were some actions that were controversial - for instance, the writing on the walls of churches or entering during the mass on Sunday and standing there silently in protest - some people just thought it was too much, that we shouldn't go that far."

Eventually, Ewa began to organise in her hometown, and found an audience whose mood was in flux. "The Catholic church has a huge impact on how people think about these questions," she says, and "as someone who is from a small town - my dad is a very devoted Christian - I understand how these people think. They are scared to support a movement like this because they feel like they will be punished eternally for their actions. But at the same time, many of them would have this internal struggle because they would feel the abortion these restrictions are a bit too much. So even on the right, even amongst supporters of PiS, they started to question their politics and why they were voting for them. This was visible in the polls, which started falling quite quickly." Among her fellow protesters, the mood was also very different to the roaring crowds of Warsaw. "I could see, again, a very different dynamic because people were much more fearful. I remember at one protest I had the megaphone and I wanted to lead the demo down the street with the town's main church. It wasn't a particularly big group - maybe two hundred people - but they were so stressed by the idea of marching on the road, and so we didn't. And the slogans were different too. The slogan of the big protests in the cities: "wypierdalać" [get the fuck out] - they weren't comfortable with that either. They would rather go for: "this should be our decision" or "I decide" - those kinds of slogans."

THE NEW LEFT, HIBERNATING

Eventually, however, the movement petered out towards the end of the year as the government delayed implementing the new law. It was a crucial mistake, Ewa says, for the Women's Strike not to capitalise on this period organisationally: "Women's Strike did not create organisational structures in the smaller towns when they had the opportunity to. They didn't introduce a system of membership. They were an organisation of leaders who made decisions on behalf of everyone. They introduced Loomio as a platform to host discussions, and they used social media to contact supporters - but that didn't translate into real democracy." Without any rank and file organisation, the role of Women's Strike is today limited to, in Ewa's words, that of a "help desk": "They have a helpline which you can use to call them. They barely organise their own initiatives, rather, they just support other people's".

"I believe that there's still this revolutionary potential", Ewa says, "but it's kind of put to sleep, let's say - waiting for a better moment, looking for strategies, looking for ideas, hoping that the parliamentary strategies that are being proposed will work." To understand the deeper political problems at play, you have to look to Poland's recent past. "We do have a tradition of struggle," she says, "but it's been forgotten." Throughout the 1980s (and the roots of the movement stretched all the way back to the 1950s), an independent workers' movement led by Solidarnosc waged an inspiring campaign for better conditions and against the Stalinist regime, including some of the biggest per capita strikes in any country in world history. But over the course of the decade, the leadership of the movement turned to the right. As President of Poland in the early 1990s, Lech Walesa oversaw a barrage of free market reforms and privatisations, and went on to endorse the US Republican Party in a number of elections. "Although Solidarnosc was successful in many ways," Ewa says, "it was also very unsuccessful because it didn't see the change that the movement had fought for. And I believe that the past few years in politics have shown the impact of these mistakes - it makes people feel less hopeful and less trusting of any kind of mass movement."

Today, the left is a marginal, if growing, force in Polish politics. Ewa is a member of Razem (which translates as "Together"), a relatively new left party which formed as a more radical alternative to the Communist-successor Democratic Left Alliance. It played a crucial role in initiating the 2016 abortion rights protests and is high profile in the European left, but, Ewa says, "Razem is very small - it has three or four thousand members, maybe. They have

representation in Parliament, but it's only six MPs." In the absence of a mass left (or even centre left) party, the task of opposing the PiS government falls to Civic Platform, a liberal grouping affiliated to the centre-right European People's Party. "The problem with Polish politics," Ewa says, "is that the whole political discourse is very much on the right. For years people were choosing the 'lesser evil' and Civic Platform ruled for at least eight years. It's actually quite interesting what is happening inside the Civic Platform right now. This is the party that was the only threat for PiS, in any election - but it's full of conservatives and they are, even now, debating what their position on abortion is. Most of them want to return to the so-called "compromise" - the situation we had for almost 30 years, but I think that they have started to realise that this is not what people want. They have to start listening to the people on the streets - and to some of the women in their party as well, who have started to push for a more expansive right to abortion." On 18th February, since our interview took place, Civic Platform announced its support for abortion up to the 12th week. This policy includes substantial qualifications, however, for instance a requirement for the person seeking an abortion to consult a psychologist. The policy has been heavily criticized by Razem and virtually all activist groups, including Women's Strike.

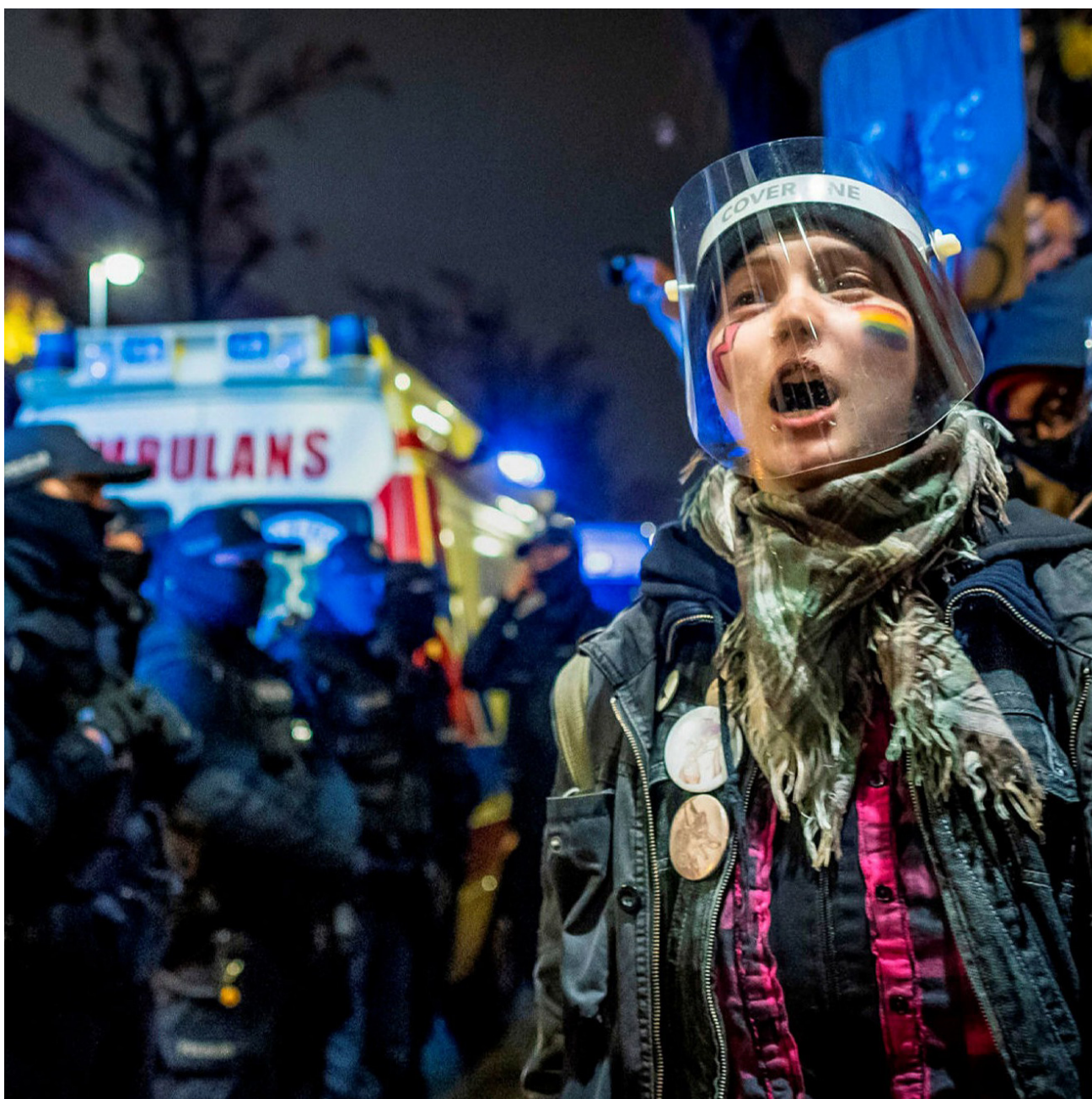
Much of the debate within Civic Platform focuses on the possibility of calling a referendum on abortion, something which many of the activists in the Polish feminist movement oppose. As Ewa explains, "I can't even imagine how the question would be formulated, whether it's PiS that leads that referendum, or Civic Platform, or Hołownia. Having experience of how they treat those issues makes it clear that a referendum would be disastrous. The biggest success of what has happened in Poland in recent months is that we've started to talk on our terms. Instead of answering questions

- when does life begin, for instance - we have started to say, 'well, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter when it starts, and the only thing that matters is the woman or the person that wants to have an abortion.'"

THE MOVEMENT AND POLITICS

In terms of the movement's political strategy, says Ewa, "there are two major things that we're trying to push. One is a Bill called 'legal abortion, no compromise.' The bill would introduce the right to abortion, wholesale - but obviously there's no parliamentary support for it". For now, it's more of a propaganda initiative, in which activists will collect as many signatures as they can and propose to parliament 'from below'. The more mainstream strategy is the 'Rescue Bill', proposed by Razem MP Magda Biejać, and backed by more than a hundred women's rights organisations. "That bill basically aims to decriminalise helping with abortion", Ewa explains, "so that there's no actual threat of going to jail for supporting women accessing abortions. What we can see is that some MPs - even from PiS - are interested in this Bill, though the hopes are still small that it will be implemented." A number of high profile cases are garnering public sympathy, Ewa says, for instance one in which a man was sentenced to six months in prison after driving his girlfriend to hospital after she began bleeding heavily from taking an abortion pill at home. The Rescue Bill was due to be voted on on February 26th, shortly after we went to print.

In their everyday work promoting the new initiatives, activists face routine harassment from ultra-nationalist and far right groups. "Just yesterday", Ewa says, "there was a situation where someone, who was collecting signatures in support of the Rescue Bill, who was attacked by a member of the far right on the street, so there is an atmosphere of fear." The far right - in its religious conservative iteration - is already in government in Poland in the form of PiS, but look further



down the ballot paper and you will find even nastier forces. "Even further to the right is Konfederacja", Ewa explains. "In the future there is a threat of them and PiS cooperating and ending up in some kind of coalition, but for now Konfederacja is at least trying to distinguish themselves from PiS. So they are critical of the decisions by PiS around pandemic and the lockdown - they even claim that the pandemic is a hoax." In the recent presidential elections, the Konfederacja candidate, Krzysztof Bosak, got around 7 per cent of the vote. Both PiS and Konfederacja are very connected to the Church, and, she says, "to dangerous religious organisations like Ordo Iuris, which became quite prominent in Poland. Ordo Iuris is doing a lot also to threaten the doctors that would do abortions. They've sent out a threatening memo, for example, to different hospitals in Poland."

On top of all of the more established right parties, there is a new movement emerging - Ruch Polska 2050 [Poland 2050 Movement], led by Szymon Hołownia, who came third in the 2020 Polish Presidential election. "He's a Catholic," says Ewa. "He claims not to be far right and he is introducing this new way of talking: about a dialogue, an open conversation. He claims he wants to separate the church from politics, and he has managed to get some prominent politicians from a Civic Platform into his ranks. He is trying to take votes from the left; he is, for instance, advocating action towards combating climate change, which is quite a new thing in Poland. So he seems to offer a new, modern way of thinking but at the same time, he openly says that he wouldn't support abortion in any case. So we have four major parties right now: PiS, Konfederacja, 2050 and Civic Platform. All of them are on the right, with PiS and Konfederacja on the far right."

The growth of the far right has gone hand in hand with an assault on Poland's democratic institutions. "PiS have introduced a series of judicial reforms that mean the Polish judiciary is a very political institution right now", says Ewa, "and here we can see the problems that are culminating over the years - systemic changes that are, piece-by-piece, eroding Poland's democratic institutions; the media, the judiciary. And then you have the small left, and no real left media. It's going to be a very, very difficult struggle to get left-wing politics into the mainstream."

WHAT NEXT?

In the face of this bleak situation, the feminist movement and the new Polish left has, in spite of everything, broken through and inspired the courage and imagination of hundreds of thousands of Poles. "The thing that was really hopeful about these protests was that, quite quickly people started to radicalise - they realised, 'oh God, I can be on the

streets. I can be attacked by the police. They can kettle us and use pepper gas. But that doesn't mean I should stop doing this - that means I need to push even more!" says Ewa. "I've noticed, for instance, that there's a wave of high school students signing out of religion classes at high school. There is a wave of apostasy happening all over Poland. People are starting to criticise the church more openly. They are less fearful of being critical, which is quite new in Poland, because we rather treated this as a sacred space, which you couldn't criticise before."

The feminist movement has allies in a modest wave of renewal in the trade union movement. "One trade union that comes to my mind is OZZ, Inicjatywa Pracownicza [Workers' Initiative Union]," Ewa says. "It's a grassroots trade union founded on the initiative of employees of the Cegielski plant in Poznan and local social movements around 10 years ago. It has a number of new committees in different sectors like health care, theatres and education, but recently, around Christmas, they managed to unite with Amazon workers in Germany and organise some major strikes. Poland is a bit of a hub for Amazon in Europe; there are a lot of Amazon workers here. They openly supported the Women's Strike organisation and they openly support the legalisation of abortion and so on." Other than in the OZZ, Ewa says, there is a very limited organisational relationship between trade unions and the Women's Strike.

The crucial question now is how to turn the explosive protests of the autumn into a sustainable movement - and crucial to that is what the left's core demands should be. In terms of its tone and attitude, says Ewa, the left should take its lead from the Women's Strike: "Although I'm quite critical of the Women's Strike organisation, I liked their unapologetic approach to certain things. They said, 'we will not shut up. We will not stop using the bad words that you want us to stop using. We will not stop attacking the church. We will not stop saying how things are.'"

Within Razem, she argues for a maximalist approach: "I think we should go for the 'blank page'," she says, "for no restrictions on abortions. Otherwise we end up falling into the narrative of the right-wingers. The line we should take is: autonomy of the body means you cannot force someone to give birth. It seems radical. But it's the patriarchal ideology that we've internalised in our own heads that makes it seem radical - it's actually not. Talking about what we think is right is the only way to move that discourse back to normal. And this is the problem we have on the Polish left; people are scared to look too radical. I understand why people are fearful, but at the same time being fearful isn't going to get us very far."

LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN

Becky Crocker

For years, Workers' Liberty has been talking about 'social reproduction', a term that covers all sorts of domestic labour, such as caring for people, keeping workers fed and fit for work and bringing children into the world. This work carries little status because it has traditionally been performed by women for free in the home. In the world of paid employment, so-called 'women's work', such as caring and cleaning, has also been notoriously undervalued and underpaid.

Despite its low status, this work is essential for society and for the capitalist economy. Before the pandemic, a lot of it was taking place in our houses for free, supplemented by informal care networks (mostly women). From the capitalists' perspective, our free labour, plus a small amount of government support - schools, nurseries, etc. - meant that enough workers could keep turning up for work each day, the economy could keep ticking over and there was no real need to ask how this miracle was being achieved.

It was an inadequate arrangement. Ask any woman who has been excluded from work or faced discrimination because of the lack of social support for caring roles. Ask any parent stressed about trying to work and care, trying to pay for private childcare in a low waged economy or else lose their job. We already knew that the whole arrangement hung by a thread. Then Covid-19 came along and broke it.

Schools and childcare settings closed to the majority of children between March and September 2020 and again in January 2021. For most of the last year, a lot of parents have attempted to provide childcare and education at home - often at a cost of being able to work. Since Covid came along, it's certainly felt like childcare and tasks relating to 'social reproduction' have been a lot more visible. But, overall, the press, the unions and the Labour Party have not been nearly angry enough about what we've seen. The pandemic has shone a light on age-old problems: systematic devaluation of social reproduction and deep-rooted sexism in our society. We've got to use this opportunity to demand something radically better, especially because all evidence so far is that Covid has further entrenched women's inequality.

Women's Fightback has spoken to several women about their experiences during the pandemic. We've also read some of the studies that have started to come out. We are beginning a conversation about what Covid-19 has revealed about women's roles and inequality and are starting to sketch out a vision for a way forward. Here is what they said:

"The experience of Covid has highlighted how oppressive and exclusionary the idea of 'the household' is. Of course, from a public health point of view, there wasn't really any other way around this than to set guidelines based on who you live with. But it's a nightmare for women across the world because all the ways we have found to manage and mitigate the double or triple burden of paid employment and unpaid labour in the home and more general social reproduction of caring for our families and neighbours has been completely turned upside down. We always say it takes a village to raise a child. There shouldn't be so much expectation that all the caring can be done within one unit. The expectation that women we can care without wider social support is oppressive."



The Polish Women's Strike linked up with abortion rights activists in Argentina, and protestors in Poland adopted the now famous green bandana on demonstrations. Argentina, much like Poland, is a very religious, Catholic country. After a long battle, on 24 January 2021, Argentina legalised abortion up to 14 weeks. A historic victory!

...

"I work specifically with teenage parents with young children in an area known for deprivation. The young mums were being instructed to isolate as a 'household' but there was no way they were going to do that - they may be living with partners but they are also young men and caring for their kids really does take 'a village'. Their village tends to be their mum, their gran, their aunt, their sister - sometimes it is their dad or grandad too (though less so). It is these same communities, working class communities, who are often being held up as rule breakers. But they are doing what is necessary. The 'household' is really quite a middle class idea".

...

"So many community activities, either run through the public or voluntary sector, that support mums and babies were instantly shut down (breastfeeding groups, mum and baby / toddler sessions - all that). This has been very hard on new mums. These services are a lifeline. We shouldn't be in a situation where our ability to manage our caring responsibilities hangs by a thread. All of this has highlighted how generally unsupportive society is for something that is so essential – caring and childcare".

...

"You'll never get any credit from society at large for playing any kind of a role in childcare. If looking after kids is what you do with your life then it's not seen as work. Or if you take time off from your job to look after kids, it's frowned upon, you're seen as less committed to your job and they look for ways to get rid of you. But suddenly when schools closed, the government started panicking that there wasn't enough childcare, and piling pressure onto schools to reopen. Turns out that we'd been doing something worthwhile all along!"

...

"I work in a highly feminised workforce but even then, as soon as lockdown began, we were expected to continue or jobs with kids at home, with partners in the home working, and no access to all the childcare support we had in place to support us previously (not to mention those who cared for older relatives). When the support was taken away from us nobody really made allowances for that, we had to just get on with it. This pandemic has removed everything we knew we needed in our lives but is very rarely accounted for because we are not supposed to see it as essential work. If we saw it as essential, we would have to value it".

...

"For months I was working until 10pm every night just so I could keep on top of my job while giving some time to my daughter during the day. As a single mum, there was nobody else around for her. But I felt like I couldn't be asking for 'favourites' from work so I just had to carry on. I'm exhausted."

...

"I've dropped down my hours at work from four to 2.5 days for childcare, but they haven't given me any less work to do. On the one hand it's great that they've been flexible, but I am very stressed about how behind I am getting".

...

"When schools closed, my manager said, "Just do what you can". In many ways it's helpful, but the end result is that I feel like a crap mum and a crap employee, failing on every front. "My manager said, 'just do as much work as you can'. I wish we could be given paid time off so we don't have this horrible feeling of trying to do everything and letting everyone down".

WORKING MUMS, PAYING THE PRICE

Summary of TUC report, published January 2021.

We went into the pandemic unequal and are likely to emerge even more unequal. The TUC report *Working Mums, Paying the Price*, has said that working class women will be hit hardest. Women have lost jobs, income and employment opportunities and it's all taken its toll on our mental health

KEY FINDINGS:

Although furlough has been available to working parents since April 2020, employers are not generally approving requests. 7 in 10 requests for furlough have been turned down by employers and employers have not been informing people of the scheme. 78 percent of mums affected by school closures have not been offered furlough by their employer. The TUC is calling for furlough to be a temporary legal right, although it would be better to have proper parental leave entitlement in the UK. A private sector, part-time worker, with two children under five, said:

"I requested furlough and it was refused. [My manager] feared opening the floodgates, feared the wider business will think our team can manage without [me] and be subject to headcount reduction. Told to take unpaid leave which I can't afford. I work for a global multi-billion pound business. It's insane. Many others are in a similar situation."

Nine out of ten mums say their mental health has been negatively impacted experiencing levels of stress and anxiety. A TUC survey of mums during the first lockdown found that 30 percent regularly worked early in the morning (pre-8am) or late at night (post-8pm). As this mum told the TUC:

"I've a three, six & seven year old and work 9-5 at home. My husband usually works a 60-70 hour week. It means he cannot help with the children. They need constant encouragement and support [with homeschooling]...then there's a three year old wanting everyone to play too. At 5pm when I technically finish work, it's then starting dinner, bath & bedtime. Then cleaning up. By 8pm I was exhausted but had to start working again. I finished at 1am and was up at 5.30am (as usual) with my three year old. I'm facing weeks, maybe longer of this. I cannot sustain this. I just can't."

One-quarter of mums are worried they will lose their job, either through being singled out for redundancy, sacked or denied hours. Nearly half of mums (48 percent) fear they

will be treated negatively by their employer as a result of difficulties with childcare. One mum - a private sector worker, working full time, with two children under ten, one over ten - said,

"I have three children studying across three key stages and trying to work full time [because I'm] in fear of losing my job. I am exhausted, I am stressed, I am anxious and I am only just about keeping myself and my children on track. I feel like I can't afford to ask to be furloughed, so literally have no choice but to carry on".

A quarter of mums who replied to the survey were using annual leave to manage their childcare – but nearly one in five (18 per cent) had been forced to reduce their working hours and around one in 14 (seven per cent) are taking unpaid leave from work and receiving no income.

Very traditional gender roles persist. Only 42% of mums surveyed were being supported by a partner in their efforts at homeschooling.

THE TUC IS DEMANDING:

"Other countries have taken emergency steps to support parents. For example, in Germany, parents have been given an additional ten days leave to support children, and single parents an additional 20 days 5. In March, Italy approved 15 days paid parental leave for both parents, while schools are closed 6. The UK government must do the same.

The government must help working families balance paid work and childcare, by reforming the system of parental leave and sick pay; including bringing in:

- Ten days' paid carers leave, from day one in a job, for all parents. Currently parents have no statutory right to paid leave to look after their children.
- A right to flexible work for all parents. Flexible working can take lots of different forms, including having predictable or set hours, working from home, job-sharing, compressed hours and term-time working.
- An increase in sick pay to at least the level of the real Living Wage, for everyone in work, to ensure workers can afford to self-isolate if they need to.
- All newly self-employed parents to have access the self-employment income support scheme (SEISS)".



FOR A SHORTER WORKING WEEK

Ruth Cashman

The shorter working week should be a central demand for the 'new normal' in post-pandemic recovery. So it's fortuitous timing for the publication of *The Case for a Four Day Week*, written by Anna Coote, Aidan Harper and Alfie Stirling. It argues that reduced working time is good for human well-being, for the natural environment and for building a prosperous economy and aims to provide a roadmap for a transition from today's standard five day/35-hour work week towards four days or 30-hours as the new norm.

THE EIGHT-HOUR DAY

Throughout human history, economic affairs have dominated human life. For generations, the low level of technology and industry meant that all our energies had to be devoted to the struggle to get the bare essentials. Under capitalism, however, we have made sufficient advances to produce all that we need. But instead of using this capacity to meet those needs, the capitalist system is predicated on a drive for more profit; on making the worker work longer and harder, for less.

Since the early days of the labour movement there has been a struggle over working hours, the amount of time each day or week during which workers are compelled to sell our labour power to a boss in order to live:

"In nineteenth century Britain, a regular working day ranged from 10 to 16 hours, typically for six

days a week... The eight-hour movement gathered strength, and workers came out in their thousands to demand 'Eight Hours Work – Eight Hours Rest – Eight Hours For What We Will.'

"Karl Marx maintained that the shortening of the working day was a 'basic prerequisite' of what he described as 'the true realm of freedom' and this became a central issue for socialist and labour movements in industrialised countries across the world."

Workers fought their bosses' attempts to lengthen the working week and eventually won victories to increase their leisure time.

Gas workers in East London became the first workers in Britain to win the 8-hour week. In 1889, thousands of men were working long, hard days at the Beckton Gas Works in East London. Stokers would shovel coal for up to 13 hours a day and take home just 5d (2.5p) per hour. Birmingham-born Will Thorne had been working since he was six. Now in his thirties and working at Beckton, Thorne decided to form a union – The National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers. On Sunday 31 March 1889, a large crowd gathered at the Beckton Works to hear him make the case for the new union:

"Fellow wage slaves.... I know that many of you have been working eighteen hours under very hard and difficult conditions, that many of you must be dead tired; often I have done the eighteen-hour shift... Let me tell you that you will never get any alteration in Sunday work, no alteration in any of your conditions or wages, unless you join together and form a strong trade union. Then you will be able to have a voice and say how long you will work, and how much you will do for a day's work."

"By your labour power you create things for the community, you create wealth and dividends, but you have no say, no voice, in any of these matters. All this can be altered if you will join together and form a powerful union, not only for gas workers, but one that will embrace all kinds of general labourers. It is easy to break one stick, but when fifty sticks are together in one bundle it is a much more difficult job."

This was the birth of the union. Within weeks, it had 3000 members. They went on strike to force the bosses to reduce the working hours. Their strike was a success and helped establish the principle of shorter working days.

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries labour movement action pushed down work hours bit-by-bit.

Now, with the retreat of militant trade unionism this trend has stalled or reversed, in the UK and USA at least, and the working week is creeping back up.

TACKLING GENDER INEQUALITY

Sharing out work, by creating more jobs on fewer hours, would help those working long hours at the same time as creating jobs for those without work. It is harder to find well-paid part-time work and shortening the standard working week could and should be used to level up conditions between full and part-time workers.

A shorter working week would also make it easier for women and men to share unpaid caring and domestic work more equally. At the moment the financial incentive for two parent families is a twin-track strategy: have one parent concentrating on career development and working long hours in a better-paid role, while the other parent (typically the mother) works shorter hours in a lower-paid supplementary role, so that they can focus on childcare. Even where both parents work, "breadwinner" and "homemaker" roles still exist.

The authors of *A Four Day Week* are clear the shorter working week ought not just give women a better work/life balance, but men too, "as an essential step towards changing today's gendered pattern of time use." Men will not automatically use additional free time to take on more domestic responsibilities, but it is nonetheless necessary. The authors are right that a shorter working week is not just a foundational demand for the labour movement but a hugely relevant socialist feminist demand for gender equality.

SAVING THE ENVIRONMENT

The book describes a range of social, economic and

environmental benefits from a shorter working week. When people have more disposable time, they are also less likely to buy energy-intensive 'convenience' goods such as processed ready meals, or to opt for faster and less sustainable modes of transport, such as a car instead of a bike, or a plane instead of a train.

With unemployment rising, a four-day week offers a way of sharing out the number of jobs among more people, cutting the numbers of unemployed and releasing others from long working hours. With rates of pay protected, it can improve wellbeing by reducing stress and anxiety, and making it easier to combine employment with domestic responsibilities.

The book also discusses advantages of cutting the working week without pay protection. In this model consumption (and ecological damage) is reduced by economy wide wage restraint;

"Although trade unions are understandably committed to reducing the hours without pro rata loss of pay, Schor envisages a gradual shift towards workers taking reduced hours in return for a smaller annual increment. The gradual and cumulative effect will be to slow the rate at which incomes increase and consequently the amount that is consumed."

SOCIALISM AND THE SHORTER WORKING WEEK

As a wide-ranging survey of all the arguments for and all the routes to the four day week, the book is effective. But we are not neutral in the whys and hows of shrinking the working week.

We are not interested in improving the rate of exploitation of workers. Some of the arguments in the book are not pitched particularly radically. They put forward evidence, for instance, to show that when people work fewer hours, the quality of their work improves, which can boost economic productivity. In other words, the shorter working week can be good for business!

Shortening working hours claws back some time from our bosses, why would we want to work harder in the hours we are at work? We don't want to do the same amount of work in less time, we want work spread out more rationally between more workers.

Our socialist project is aimed at ending the dominance of economic concerns over human life. The demand to reduce working hours knits together the living struggles of the workers but also points the way to the revolutionary transformation of society we want to see.

A decent and rational society would cut the working week to a level which enables everybody to have free time and control over their activity, not to have their lives dominated by what an employer or the state tells them to do. We should share that work out equally, so that we don't have some people overworked, some people in idleness and rich, and other people in idleness and poor as under capitalism. There are many arguments for shorter working weeks. Our roadmap for transition should build the ability and confidence of the working class to transform society.

• Anna Coote, Aidan Harper & Alfie Stirling, *The Case for a Four Day Week*, (Polity Press, 2020).

DISCRIMINATION ON THE TUBE

An excerpt from an interview with Becky Crocker,
Workers' Liberty and RMT activist.

When Ada, my daughter, was nearly two, I had a miscarriage. On the day I got back to work, they presented me with a case conference notification letter.

The case conference process is designed for people with long-term health conditions that mean they are unable to do their job. Working in many of the jobs on London Underground requires doing certain things. You're supposed to evacuate a station in an emergency; to be able to go down the track. So there's a *very small* number of people who, for whatever reason, may not be able to do their job anymore. And that's what that procedure exists for.

I used to be a rep and I told them: "You can't do this. This is not what this is for". My manager pulled up my attendance history. In addition to the miscarriage, the list contained things like unpaid leave for domestic responsibilities - which it was my legal right to take. When I took time off to look after Ada when she was sick, I wasn't even being paid for it!

The fact that I had had a miscarriage didn't matter to London Underground. There was a company-wide crackdown taking place. Anybody who did not have 96 percent attendance was put through this process, even though everybody knew

this was not what it had been designed for. People who had cancer, who were having treatment and were in recovery were still put through this process and made to feel that their job was in the balance.

It's daft! There's no economic sense in it. There have been studies done that demonstrate that these attendance policies cost more money to administer than they ever recoup in lost sick pay. But that's not the point. They very effectively create a sense of vulnerability. They make sure that you know your place.

I had to go to the company doctor, talk about my medical history and *make my case* that there were no underlying medical reasons. I'd had a miscarriage, I'd just taken a month off work to recover from surgery. I also had a handful of other absences that were all to do with the stage of life I was at. I was a new mum with a kid in nursery who was repeatedly getting sick. I wasn't sleeping very well because my daughter didn't sleep very well and I was perpetually run down. Despite all of this, my attendance was still 90%.


Over Christmas I got gastric flu and I spent the entire time in bed thinking, "I've lost my job. I've lost my job". When I got

back to work they called me into the office and my manager handed me a letter. I thought it was going to be an invitation to attend a Company Disciplinary Interview so they could try to sack me.

Instead, the letter told me that the case conference had been dropped. The Piccadilly line drivers had gone on strike over Christmas against the abuse of the attendance policy, and the letter read: "I've been instructed by Employee Relations to abide by London Underground's attendance policy."

And so there you have it. It was an admission that they should never have been doing any of it. It was totally outside of company policy. I still have that letter.

I will never forgive London Underground for subjecting me to months of stress and fear for my job at the same time as I was dealing with the grief of losing a pregnancy. Things got so bad for my mental health around that time that I got counselling on the NHS. I told the counsellor, "I feel like I'm being punished for having a miscarriage". The counsellor replied: "That's because you are!"



The five women councillors are taken to Holloway prison.

WOMEN OF THE POPLAR REBELLION

Janine Booth

Our story is set just after the first world war in Poplar, an east London borough with a population of 160,000 people crammed into the docklands in the bend of the River Thames (Poplar) and the area just north of it (Bow).

It was an impoverished and exclusively working-class area, which had suffered greatly during the 'Great War'. Working-class women juggled low-waged work with domestic chores, contending with overcrowded housing, unsanitary conditions, fatherless children and war-wounded husbands and sons.

They had fought against profiteering companies, government stinginess and for the vote, which many – but not all – of them now had. Their experience in campaigning, particularly in the East London suffragettes, stood them in good stead for the battles they faced under the post-war Tory-Liberal coalition government.

In 1919, newly-enfranchised women and men elected Labour candidates to local councils, including many in London. In November, Labour won thirty-nine of the forty-two seats on Poplar Borough Council. Four of the successful candidates were women:

- **Jane March**, a former health visitor
- **Nellie Cressall**, who had been a laundrette worker and suffrage activist
- **Jennie Mackay**, the first woman member of what would become the National Union of General Municipal Workers (forerunner of today's GMB)
- **Julia Scurr**, who had led the suffragette deputation to the government protesting against women's sweated labour.

All were listed in their nominations as 'married women', and all except Jennie were married to male Poplar Labour candidates. But they were all socialist women in their own right, with records and politics to prove it.

Although four women candidates may seem a small number, it was significantly better than in other east London

boroughs, where the Labour parties mustered only five women candidates between them.

The newly-elected Labour council appointed four 'aldermen' (a now-defunct local government post ranking between councillor and Mayor), including two women:

- **Susan Lawrence**, a former Tory who had defected to Labour in protest at the Conservative-led London County Council's treatment of its school workers
- **Minnie Lansbury**, a former schoolteacher and assistant secretary of the East London suffragettes.

It also elected George Lansbury as Mayor, a socialist and supporter of women's suffrage of national renown, but who nonetheless continued his political activity at the expense of his wife Bessie, herself a committed socialist who had to step back from activism to care for their large family.

Like many dockside communities, Poplar had significant immigrant populations, and these were represented among its council's new women members. Julia Scurr was Irish, Minnie Lansbury the daughter of Jewish immigrants, and Jennie MacKay the daughter of an Italian father.

Having turfed out the previous 'Municipal Reform' (Tory and Liberal) administration of Poplar Council, Poplar Labour set about improving living conditions for their working-class residents. They built the first new public housing for years, and appointed housing inspectors who went to private rented housing and ordered landlords to improve them. They took the small, charity-run tuberculosis (TB) dispensary into municipal ownership and expanded it. The council improved maternity and child welfare services, baths and wash-houses. These policies brought about significant improvements to working-class women's lives.

Poplar's Labour council applied its principles in its role as an employer. It put casual workers on permanent contracts, set a minimum wage at £4 per week, and introduced equal pay for women and men. Labour Party policy supported equal

pay, but unlike Poplar, many Labour councils saw 'policy' as meaning aspirations for the future rather than principles to implement in the present.

RECESSION AND DEFIANCE

After a brief post-war boom, recession struck, and as a dockside borough, Poplar was hit particularly hard. Facing the choice of backing down or defying the unfair local government funding system, Poplar's labour movement chose the latter. In March 1921, the council voted to refuse to collect and pay that portion of the rates (called precepts) that it was supposed to give to cross-London bodies, including the London County Council (LCC).

They did not simply take this stand as a budgeting decision – they mobilised people in support. Poplar's Labour activists knocked on doors, talked with people at work and on street corners. Poplar Labour women organised monthly events attended by hundreds. And they held lots of demonstrations.

The biggest was on the day of the main court hearing, as the LCC applied to a judge to instruct Poplar to pay up. On 29 July 1921, five thousand people marched the five miles from Poplar to the High Court on the Strand to demand that the authorities do battle with poverty and unemployment rather than with their defiant local council. Adorned with banners and placards, photographs show the march looking very impressive. But it also looked very male. Although women were active in community and political struggles, it seems that they were not expected to go on marches; they were supposed to be looking after the home. There were lots of strong, inspiring women involved in this struggle, but there was still sexism, and women were still prevented from participating on an equal level.

Several of the councillors, including some of the women, gave evidence to the court, describing Poplar's poverty and happily admitting to breaking the law. The judge told them to pay up or go to prison. He gave them the month of August to consider their position, so they spent the month

reaffirming their refusal to pay the precepts and building their movement.

TO PRISON

At the start of September, thirty Poplar Labour councillors were arrested and taken to prison. Five of the six women councillors and aldermen were on the list of those to be arrested. Jane March and several of the male councillors were left off, for reasons that were not clear.

Huge crowds gathered outside the councillors' houses, especially those of Julia Scurr and Minnie Lansbury, who were very popular local activists.

The five women made an appointment with the sheriff to be arrested together at the Town Hall in Newby Place. They gave speeches from the Town Hall balcony to the thousands of assembled supporters. At one point, a man shouted out that they should stop the women being taken away. But Susan Lawrence quickly replied that they had just as much right as the men to be arrested for their stance.

The sheriff drove them at walking pace as far as the borough boundary, as the crowds marched alongside them, cheering them on. Then he took the five women to HM Prison Holloway. Their twenty-five male colleagues were incarcerated in HMP Brixton.

Prison conditions were dreadful, and Nellie Cressall (who was eight months pregnant), Jennie MacKay and Minnie Lansbury were all admitted to the hospital wing within days. Supporters marched to the prisons and held meetings outside. A fund to support the councillors' children attracted donations from far and wide.

The councillors kept up their fight behind bars, and within three weeks had persuaded the authorities to allow them to meet in prison! Initially, only the male councillors met, but soon after, the women councillors were taken by car from Holloway to Brixton to join the meetings. They discussed prison conditions, their campaign for their release and for equalisation of rates – and they discussed the practical business of working-class life in Poplar: they continued to serve the people who elected them.

Public outcry forced the government to order Nellie Cressall's release. She made legal history, becoming the first person to be released from imprisonment for contempt of court without first having purged her contempt.

When two other councils – Stepney and Bethnal Green – voted to take the same action as Poplar, the government knew that it was beaten and began negotiating the councillors' release. On 13 October, the remaining women were released, and were taken by car to Brixton to meet their male colleagues (and in some cases, husbands!). The government rushed through a law to introduce cross-London pooling of outdoor relief (what we would now call welfare benefits). Poplar gained over a quarter of a million pounds per year – in 1921 money! It was a massive win.

STILL RELEVANT TODAY

As working-class women deal with a new way of austerity, health crises, unemployment and attacks on public services, Labour councils again face the choice of how to respond. Sadly, most are choosing to implement cuts rather than resist them. But we can choose to resist. Poplar's women organised as workers, as service users, as mothers, as community activists. We can do the same, and in doing so, make our representatives in local councils do the right thing.

Janine Booth is author of

• *Guilty and Proud of it: Poplar's rebel councillors and guardians 1919-25* (Merlin Press, 2009). Available at: www.janinebooth.com/shop

• *Minnie Lansbury: suffragette, socialist, rebel councillor* (Five Leaves, 2018) Available at: www.fiveleaves.co.uk



Minnie Lansbury arrives at Poplar Town Hall to be arrested.

MORE GREEN SPACE

Natalia Cassidy

Exceptional times, like those that we are living through, often highlight the shortcomings in our society. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many, from the chronic underfunding of our health service to the inability to care for the most vulnerable amongst us. We have also seen the shutting down of green spaces, particularly in cities, on the grounds that people should simply stay home.

This is straightforwardly a class issue. Those with higher incomes are far more likely to live in houses with access to gardens, whilst those on lower incomes are more likely to live in flats with no gardens or, perhaps, small communal green spaces that are likely to be less safe, in terms of density of people per square metre, than public parks. The shutting of big, spacious parks makes locals less safe, not more.

This is, of course, an issue that stretches beyond the immediate crisis. The need for clean, accessible and plentiful open space should be seen as a key demand of a socialist feminist programme. There are very few leisure activities in modern capitalism that are free and non-commodified. Almost everywhere we go to spend time outside of the home, we are charged for the privilege – coffee shops, pubs, cinemas all offer leisure and spaces to spend time with loved ones; but only for paying customers.

The need for clean, safe, green space is especially important for those performing childcare. Today, this still overwhelmingly falls upon women, who often have to negotiate the strain of juggling waged work with domestic work. Let's consider the case of a single-earning household

with two young children, as an example: the weekend arrives and the kids are in need of activities and stimulation. Without a garden or the ability to pay for activities such as going to the cinema or a swimming pool, the park fills an essential role in allowing these children to keep active and engage with those outside of their immediate social circle at their school. If these parks and green spaces are shut down we deprive hundreds of thousands of working class families of access to spaces in which they can engage in affordable leisure and exercise on a regular basis.

Public parks have long been the target of assaults by the right and those who lament the use of land for broad social benefit rather than for luxury flats or office space. Parks have been decried as spaces of social decay: singled out as places where people drink, take drugs, engage in explicit acts etc., these are used as ways to justify the shutting down of parks and the privatisation of our common spaces (the image painted of parks here is of course reversed when the right wants to demonise travelling communities when they occupy land in public parks, at which point parks are lauded for their cleanliness and contribution to the wellbeing of the common good).

We should, as socialist feminists, resist all attempts at the privatisation of our spaces and campaign for the expansion of green, open, accessible spaces for all. Socialism is fundamentally about freedom and people's ability to engage freely and equitably in all that life and nature has to offer. Publicly owned and maintained green spaces are a crucial part of the world we are fighting for.

CAN BIDEN KILL OFF TRUMPISM?

Vicki Morris

In his first few hours as US President Joe Biden put the US on the path to re-joining the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organisation, stopped building the Mexico border wall, made mask-wearing mandatory on federal property, announced an end to the ban on trans people serving in the military, cancelled permits for the Keystone XL oil pipeline, strengthened the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme, added gender-neutral pronoun options to the online White House contact form, and enacted a number of other measures that would gladden the heart of any liberal or leftist.

With Democratic control of the House of Representatives and a slim majority in the Senate, Biden's administration can do a lot of what it likes in the next four years; although he will need to work with Trump's engineered 6:3 conservative:liberal majority in the Supreme Court. It marks a return to minimally competent, neoliberal, bourgeois government. Can Biden's presidency go beyond that, and will it be enough to kill off Trumpism?

It's sobering to think that the result of the presidential election, even after Trump's dire first term, was so close: Biden, 81,268,757 (51.3%)/Trump, 74,216,722 (46.9%). Turnout was 62% of the voting age population, higher than recent elections, but given that this election was posed in make-or-break terms by both sides, a substantial proportion of Americans still does not recognise itself in either of the mainstream parties

WHO SUPPORTS TRUMP?

The forces of Trumpism, and the movement he has allied with and fostered, include evangelicals, xenophobes, and those whose livelihoods have been disrupted by the decline of industry.

"As he accentuated divisions among Americans, Trump sewed a crazy quilt of these and other divergent groups by treating each of them differently.

"He won the support of more evangelicals by pushing the speedy approval of [anti-abortion] Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. For xenophobes, he continued to blame COVID-19 on China, and refused to condemn the white supremacist Proud Boys until severely criticized. For those hurt by the shrinking industrial economy, he prioritized the economy over fighting the pandemic." (Ron Stagg, The Conversation, 15 November 2020)

those Trump-voters or those apathetic, non-voters? And, a more substantial question: is a strengthened Democratic Party the way out of America's grossly unequal society?

DIVIDED POLITICS, UNEQUAL SOCIETY

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated the glaring inequalities in US society, riven as it is along lines of race and class.

A few recent statistics illustrate the problem. The US stands 11th in the world for Covid-19 death rate (the UK 6th), and people of colour are over-represented among the 419k people who have died. By late 2020, stoked by the pandemic, unemployment stood at 13.2% for Black people, 11.2% for Latinos, and 7.9% for white people. Yet in the midst of all this suffering during the pandemic 651 billionaires have gained more than \$1tn in additional wealth.

Like all – competent – governments worldwide, the US Government is currently spending vast amounts of money shoring up the economy and providing a public safety net during the pandemic. Biden is now pressing Congress to pass a US\$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package to add to the US\$900 billion approved already under Trump.

But what will happen once the pandemic recedes, and who will be asked to pay back the extra debt? Will it be the rich, or the poor and middle class?

Biden is in the centre in terms of the politics of the pro-business Democratic Party, and he was Vice-President to Barack Obama during his underwhelming presidency that failed to deliver on its promise of great change (yes, we can; but no, we didn't). Biden will not steer Democratic government to the left and will enact no substantial political or social reforms to address US inequality in the longer term.

And what of Vice-President Kamala Harris? If Biden does not run for a second term, Harris would be in a good position to be the Democratic presidential candidate in 2024. But she is not on the left of the Democratic Party, and critics say that in her law career, including as California attorney general, she was not, as she claims to have been, a "progressive prosecutor." The fanfare around her promotion to the highest office held by any woman/woman of colour says more about the poor state of women's and Black people's representation in the US than it does about Harris as a feminist icon.

WHAT IS THE THREAT?

The storming of the Capitol on January 6 shocked most Americans, Republican Party supporters included, and many feared this was the start of an insurrectionary wave. But the many threatened demonstrations on the day of

Biden's inauguration didn't happen. The organisers seem to have been deterred by arrests of those taking part in the 6 January events, and the likelihood that state capitols would be heavily guarded, as the US Capitol was for Inauguration Day itself.

Has the far-right threat been exaggerated? Is the US about to fall to fascism? No, on both counts, but Trump's four years in office massively emboldened the far-right, and Trump has given them respectability: they now appear as the 'out-there' wing of the conservative coalition but no longer beyond the pale. Many Republican Party politicians think so too, as they refused to join in condemnation of Trump in the aftermath of 6 January for fear of alienating the Trumpist electorate. Trumpism continues to be a substantial force in the Republican Party.

If Biden's presidency fails to deliver to his voters and alienates still more of those attracted to Trumpism, the 2024 election could see another far-right Republican returned to the White House, in a context where the far-right is becoming more organised and emboldened. Moreover, the Covid-19 crisis makes a Biden failure and growing political disenchantment harder to avoid.

THE LEFT

The main socialist organisation, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), grew dramatically around Bernie Sanders' bids for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 and 2020: it went from around 5,000 in 2015 to 66,000 today. A number of its members are high-profile members of the House of Representatives, elected on the Democratic ticket, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib.

The DSA was torn during the 2020 election: they did not officially endorse Biden, but many of their members criticised this and campaigned for Biden in order to stop Trump, while the trade union movement overwhelmingly backed Biden. The AWL supported a third candidate in the presidential election, Howie Hawkins.

There is a substantial force to the left of Biden. Trade unionists and leftists, and campaigners for equal rights for all Americans, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, will need to step up their campaigns and struggles to ensure that Trumpism does not bounce back from Trump's defeat. They must keep campaigning on the social issues that can win part of Trump's base to an orientation to the labour movement, as well as represent those working-class Americans who do not see themselves reflected in the political system. They must build an independent pole to the pro-business, machine politics of the Democratic Party which offers US workers little genuine hope for the future.

What will it take for the Democratic Party to win over



SOLIDARITY WITH THE UYGHUR PEOPLE

The Uyghurs, a majority-Muslim people who mostly live in East Turkestan, are facing persecution and genocide at the hands of the Chinese State. More than a million people are interned in camps, where torture, abuse and rape are reported to be taking place.

China's propaganda has stepped up following a series of news stories internationally about their treatment of the Uyghur population. State media recently released a series of short films subtitled in English, titled *Embracing a New Life*, featuring Uyghur women narrating, in Mandarin Chinese, their "empowering" experiences after "re-education."

According to a report last year, women have been involuntarily fitted with intrauterine contraceptives or coerced into receiving sterilisation surgeries, even where they had fewer than the permitted two children. Government documents showed that women in some rural minority communities in the region have received frequent mandatory gynaecological exams and bi-monthly pregnancy tests from local health officials.

The Chinese state is looking to portray its attempted eugenics campaign as liberation-from-above for women trapped in religious communities in Xinjiang. This is state propaganda for international audiences intended to chime with much of the western propaganda around Islam and the war on terror.

We do not trust the Chinese state to bring women's liberation to a minority it is attempting to destroy.

• Get involved with the Uyghur Solidarity Campaign
www.uyghursolidarityuk.org
www.twitter.com/CampaignUyghur

FREE NODEEP KAUR!

Women have been at the forefront of resistance to India's Hindu nationalist regime and women activists have been targeted for repression.

In its most recent phase, Indian farmers' protest movement against the Modi government's neoliberal agricultural reforms has involved women in large numbers. Two high profile cases of repression against young women in the movement have dramatised the harsh repression against it.

The Western media has given quite a bit of attention to Disha Ravi, a 21 year-old climate activist arrested on 13 February in connection with Greta Thunberg's tweeting in support of the farmers. Ravi's grandparents were farmers and she has talked about the impact of seeing them struggle with the effects of climate change.

Arrest warrants are now out for two other climate activists, Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk. We must stand in solidarity with these comrades and demand the dropping of charges against them. But another case receiving less attention internationally is arguably even more important.

23 year old labour activist Nodeep Kaur, a member of the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan (Association for the Empowerment of Labourers) union, was arrested on 12 January and has been denied bail. Her sister Rajveer says she has been tortured and sexually assaulted in jail.

From a poor, Dalit ('lowest', most-oppressed caste), Sikh background in Punjab, until December last year Kaur worked in a bulb-making factory in Haryana, on the border with the Delhi region. When she decided to join the protests, she was fired without pay. In and alongside the farmers' struggle she has been central to a campaign raising workers' issues including non-payment of salaries and harassment by employers.

Kaur is accused of multiple crimes including attempted murder, assault, rioting, intimidation, trespass and extortion, because of her role leading workers' protests against employers. In fact it was the employers' thugs who used intimidation and violence against the workers.

India's Campaign Against State Repression, a student union-led network, has said: "The targeting of a young

Dalit woman who dared to raise her voice for the rightful demands of the workers has been met with the most cruel, misogynistic barbarity of the men in uniform who have resorted to sexual violence. The impunity of the police stands firmly on a Brahmanical, patriarchal, Hindutva ground."

Rajveer quotes Nodeep as saying: "If farmers and labourers unite, the government is in trouble!"

There are many, many other cases of women activists suffering repression in India under the Hindu nationalist regime. Workers' movement organiser and lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj has been in prison for over 900 days without trial.

Women organised mass gatherings and rallies during the 2019 struggle against Modi's anti-Muslim changes to citizenship laws, and a number of Delhi activists from Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage), a feminist collective that organised solidarity, are also being held.

Release our sisters and brothers and drop all charges!

FEMINISM, INTERRUPTED: A WRITE-UP

Andi Brookes

• This write-up follows a discussion in Workers' Liberty's socialist feminist reading group. Usually held in South London, the monthly reading group has been held online during the pandemic. To get involved, write to: womensfightback@workersliberty.org

Feminism, Interrupted is the second book from Lola Olufemi, co-author of "A FLY Girls Guide to University". A cross-between an introductory text and manifesto, the book is a collection of ten essays covering topics from trans rights and islamophobic misogyny to food and art.

The first chapter, "Know your history", reflects on a rich history of Black British feminist organising. Emerging from the Black Power movement from the 1970s onwards, Brixton Black Women's Group and the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent umbrella group took an explicitly internationalist and intersectional approach to their work, long before the term was coined in 1989. Both groups serve as models for building power through cultural mediums such as 'zines, alongside establishing community schools and organising in tenants campaigns. Olufemi, however, nearly throws away one of the most important points of this chapter towards its end: by 1981-86 activists and groups were subsumed into the structures of the then Greater London Council, led by Ken Livingstone. The professionalisation of their activism divorced them from the communities they were organising and ultimately neutralised them. This is not interrogated further in the chapter, or even framed as a warning against state co-option, and so the impact of this cautionary tale is mostly lost.

In three chapters in particular, Olufemi adopts an anti-state and anti-caraceral perspective ("The sexist state", "The fight for reproductive justice" and "The answer to sexual violence is not more prisons"). Liberal feminism's reliance on state protection and the legal system to advance women's rights is, she argues, entirely inadequate. The first of these chapters features interviews with members of the direct action group Sister's Uncut, which uses attention-grabbing stunts to protest against police and wider state violence. Olufemi recounts their storming of the BAFTAs red carpet in 2018, to protest against Theresa May's Domestic Violence Bill, and the time in 2015 that they turned Trafalgar Square's fountains red to protest against the closure of women's refuges. There is a clear message running through the chapter that feminists must look beyond the state, and that achieving real progress needs bold challenges from outside as well as within.

"The fight for reproductive justice" explores the difference between legislative "rights" and actual "justice" through the lens of Repeal the 8th, a successful but flawed campaign to repeal the ban on abortions in Ireland. The chapter begins by noting that historical campaigns in favour of birth control and abortion access often cited "population control" as a benefit, specifically referencing marginalised groups when doing so, leading to a general mistrust of the reproductive rights movement by people of colour. Further, Olufemi examines the aftermath of Repeal the 8th along with other abortion rights campaigns in the UK and US, demonstrating

that changes in the law do not automatically result in equal access to abortions. People still face healthcare barriers - from anti-migrant policies and extraneous requirements for medical advice, to pro-life protests outside clinics - underlining that there is a limit to the impact changing a single law can have on the system. The central argument here is that the focus on "abortion rights" from mainstream feminism can lead to the sidelining of broader healthcare issues for people of colour and the difficulties that many people still have in accessing reproductive healthcare. The chapter concludes by emphasising the urgent need for reproductive justice which goes beyond campaigning for legislation, instead focusing on systemic change, an argument echoed in a later chapter "The answer to sexual violence is not more prisons".

Olufemi is perhaps at her strongest when she discusses the struggles facing marginalised groups in "Transmisogyny: Who wins?", "The saviour complex: Muslim women and gendered Islamophobia" and "Complicating consent: How to support sex workers". The last of these distills most of its arguments for decriminalising sex work from Molly Smith & Juno Mac's excellent *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018), but builds a more specific critique of the individualistic takes on sexual consent promoted in mainstream feminism alongside. As Olufemi argues, focusing solely on teaching men to interpret consent as enthusiastic, verbal, and sober ignores the "grey" areas of power dynamics and material conditions that can impact on a person's ability to say no in sexual interactions.

In "Transmisogyny" Olufemi presents a more accessible interpretation of Judith Butler's seminal "Gender Trouble", arguing that both sex and gender are socially constructed rather than predetermined, although non-Western perspectives on gender are only briefly mentioned. Her subsequent argument that it is the "violence that [people coded as women by society] face that defines our experience of our world" rather than biology, and that it is this umbrella that critical feminism should use, is worth more debate than it is afforded in the book. The rest of the chapter is spent refuting the moral panic generated by trans-exclusionary radical feminists in the national media and exhorting critical feminists to reject the artificial dichotomy between cis & trans women that "gender critical" activists are attempting to create. If you're a supporter of trans rights and find liberal ponderings on whether you can be a 'feminist in high heels' irritating, this is the chapter for you.

Chapters looking at more abstract topics such as art and solidarity are more dense to chew through than those examining specific situations or issues. In "Art for art's sake" Olufemi seems undecided, arguing that activist art can and should be used to reflect struggles and enhance campaigns, juxtaposed against the statement that "if we want art that reflects the true complexity of our lives and the range of human emotion then we must eradicate the harmful conditions in which we live". She seems to suggest that art made in response to struggles and harm somehow does not reflect "the true complexity of our lives", and comes across as utopian in outlook. Her strongest argument in this chapter is that the issue of *who gets to make art* is as important to

feminism as the art itself, and that everyone should have access to creative outlets regardless of background or class.

Although many of the arguments Olufemi makes throughout the book will resonate with socialist feminists, she avoids using this label in *Feminism, Interrupted*, instead preferring the term "critical feminism", loosely defined as "different feminisms in conversation with each other". However, much of the book comes across as a conversation between Olufemi and liberal feminism exclusively. Adding critiques or analysis of other feminist schools of thought would have enriched the text and perhaps offered an insight into why she rejects established labels for her views.

Does it matter that she doesn't use the term socialist to describe herself? Given her insistence in the introduction that "there are no pre-given solutions" offered by feminism it's perhaps unsurprising she rejects most standard classifications for her viewpoint. And if we recognise and agree with her arguments where they matter most: on rejecting individualistic liberal corporate feminism, centering marginalised voices, and liberating the working class from the tyranny of the wage system, then the specific terms she uses for herself are perhaps less important.

There are two major criticisms to be levelled at the book as a whole, although different people will no doubt disagree with different arguments and specific points within its chapters. The first, is that while Olufemi invites the reader to imagine a different vision of the world remade along feminist principles, the text is light on routes to reach it. Despite the emphasis on feminism as a practical philosophy throughout the book, suggestions for practical actions are limited to those offered up as examples from direct action groups or other individuals, which are often presented with little comment on their success or how to build on them.

Secondly, it's not entirely clear who this book is for. *Feminism, Interrupted* is the length of an introductory text, but the language and arguments it uses at points are too academic to be aimed at a casual audience. This makes it unexpectedly heavy going for readers who haven't experienced this style of writing before.

Overall, *Feminism, Interrupted* presents an interesting and modern feminist distillation of a spectrum of topics from the familiar, to the slightly more out-there. For newer feminist readers the book offers a solid jumping off point for more in-depth explorations of the topics, with extensive resources lists at the back of the book. More experienced readers will appreciate the voices of different artists and activists from interviews that are sprinkled throughout the chapters and which add an extra dimension to arguments they will have likely heard before. For everyone, the book's pervading sense of optimism and its rallying cry that a better, more equitable future can be imagined might be just what you need to brighten up a long, gloomy winter lockdown.

• Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*, (Pluto Press, 2020)



THE PARIS COMMUNE AND THE UNION DES FEMMES

Kelly Rogers

2021 marks the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune; the moment that the working class seized political power for the first time, and held it for 72 days. Thousands of women took part in the events of the Commune and, against a backdrop of deep-rooted sexism, championed a revolutionary vision for the transformation of working class women's lives.

PARIS UNDER SEIGE

Life was hard for women in Paris in the mid-19th century. They worked long hours in back-breaking jobs and, with onerous domestic chores and squalid, overcrowded housing, homelife was little better. The majority of Parisian women were illiterate, having received little or no formal education other than catechism lessons.

After the Second Empire was toppled on 4 September 1870, Paris was placed under siege by the Prussian army; the siege would last until the provisional government surrendered at the end of January. Severe hardship saw people come together to organise community welfare and mutual aid initiatives and co-operative workshops. A new sense of solidarity and political militancy was forged.

Revolutionary clubs across every *arrondissement* in Paris would host nightly meetings, at which radical men and women, veterans of the 1848 revolutions, young workers from the Paris section of the First International and political refugees would debate political and economic issues, including women's labour and ways of winning higher pay for women workers. Meetings were exciting and passionate. Some topics were censored under the siege - criticism of the Emperor, for instance - and considerable suspense was created by speakers who might, at any moment cross into forbidden territory, causing the meetings to be shut down, amidst roars of opposition. Many of the women at the forefront of the Commune can be found in the speakers records of these meetings.

SEIZING POWER

Women played a critical role in the events of the Commune, right from the first moment of resistance. On the morning of 18 March, when the Versailles troops arrived in Montmartre

to take control of Paris, it was women who moved first. According to the account of prominent Communard, Louise Michel, "All the women were there. The general gave the order to fire. We said to soldiers: Will you shoot at us? You will not shoot at the people." Thereafter, women were at the heart of the struggle: women ambulancieres helping the wounded, sewing uniforms, writing for the Commune press, educating the children in newly secularised schools, and defending the city of Paris on the barricades and on gunboats along the Seine.

Despite the great efforts and sacrifices of women Communards, the political culture of the time was, of course, deeply sexist. Disappointingly, even under the Commune's revolutionary government, women were not granted the right to vote in elections or stand as candidates. The Commune did, however, give women some positions of responsibility, appointing them to administer welfare institutions, sending them on liaison missions to provincial cities and including them on commissions to reform education.

THE UNION DES FEMMES (WOMEN'S UNION)

On 11 April 1871, two weeks after the inauguration of the Commune, the *Journal officiel* published a front-page appeal by "un groupe des cityoennes" for the women of Paris to attend a meeting that evening, with the aim of forming "a women's movement for the defence of Paris". This founding meeting set up committees in most of the *arrondissements* of Paris to recruit volunteers for nursing and canteen work and for the construction and defence of barricades. It elected a provisional central committee (to be replaced by a committee composed of delegates from *arrondissement* committees). Members agreed to recognise the "moral authority" of the Union's central committee and follow the instructions of their *arrondissement* committees, making the Union uncharacteristically democratic centralist for an organisation of the period. Committee members could be easily recalled. The Union grew rapidly and quickly became the Commune's largest and most effective organisation, as well as functioning, in effect, as the first women's section of the International.

Its provisional council was composed of seven women, six of them workers. Elisabeth Dmitrieff, twenty-year-old socialist and co-founder of the Russian section of the International,

had spent the three months immediately preceding the Commune in London, in near daily discussions with Marx in his study, on the topic of the traditional Russian rural organisations. In March, she was dispatched to Paris as Russian envoy to the Paris Commune.

Nathalie Lemel earned her living as a stitcher in the bookbinding trade. She was elected to the bookbinders' union's strike committee during the 1864 and 1865 strikes and as a union militant she fought for equal pay between men and women. By the time the Commune came to power she was already a seasoned organiser, although best known for running *La Marmite*, a co-operative restaurant and meeting place set up a few years earlier by the Paris International. (There would later be another *La Marmite* restaurant off Tottenham Court Road in London, established by exiled Communards, which would serve as a hub for revolutionaries in London in the late 19th century.)

Sadly, little is known about the other five co-founders of the Women's Union.

Whilst devoting much of its energy to aiding immediate combat requirements, the Women's Union had an ambitious political vision: seeking a full reorganisation of women's labour and an end to gender-based economic inequality and sex discrimination. In its founding address, the Union described sex discrimination as a tool, used by the ruling class to maintain power and divide the working class. The address goes on to say that women have not just a "duty" to defend the Commune, but a "right" - it demanded a place in the revolutionary movement for the "cityoennes" of Paris.

The Union Executive sought to form women-led worker co-operatives. It was hoped that these would emerge from initiatives by women workers themselves, once the Union had organised them into associations. The Union issued wall posters and notices in newspapers inviting women to meetings where "it is hoped that the various women's occupations, such as needle trades, feather processing, artificial flowers, laundry, etc., will form unions."

In May, the Union submitted two plans to the Commune's Executive Commission: the first proposed these women's co-operatives. The second called for the "abolition of

all competition between men and women workers, their interests being absolutely identical and their solidarity essential for the success of the definitive universal strike of Labour against Capital..." or, in other words, equal pay for equal work.

In the end, due to the pressures of a precarious military situation, the workshops that had been established were devoted to making munitions, sandbags and uniforms, and before any further plans could be rolled out, the Commune was defeated.

THE VOTE

The Women's Union, along with other women in Commune, had little interest in the right to vote, which had been a popular issue for women in 1848. Debates about the vote for women are strikingly absent from records of pre-Commune club meetings, meetings held during the Commune and speeches, declarations and memoirs of Commune women.

Aggravated hardship and unemployment undoubtedly shaped the focus of the Union towards economic demands rather than the civic objectives that had had the support of several leaders of the Union before the Commune. But this disinterest also reflected a broader political perspective held by socialists in Paris at the time: that voting rights were a bourgeois distraction. Paule Minck, socialist and militant in the Women's Union, wrote in 1880 that "Universal suffrage is a double-edged weapon, and it is always the people who are wounded by it".

THE END

The Commune lasted for only 72 days, from 18 March to 21 May 1871, before it was brought to a brutal end in la Semaine Sanglante - the Bloody Week. 20,000 Communards and suspected sympathisers were executed, 8,000 were

jailed or deported, thousands of others fled into exile.

Elisabeth Dmitrieff was able to escape, and fled back to Russia. Nathalie Lemel was deported with Louise Michel to a penal colony in New Caledonia, where she stayed until she was granted amnesty in 1880. One of the other original founders of the Unions des Femmes, Blanche Lefevre died on a barricade.

The Paris Commune had significant limitations, perhaps most of all when it comes to women's equality. André Leo, official propagandist of the Commune and active member of the Women's Union, wrote on 8 May 1871,

"If a history of France since 1789 were to be written dealing only with the inconsistencies of revolutionary moments, the question of women would be the largest chapter, and it would show how these movements have always found the way to drive half their troops over to the enemy; troops who had asked for nothing more than to fight at their side..."

Nevertheless, Leo remained a loyal and active participant in the Commune to the end. It's easy to see why. Despite its failings, the Commune brought thousands of working class women into a world-historic struggle. These women, despite being denied positions of power in the Commune's Executive, would be some of the best organised militants of the revolution. They were indispensable from beginning to end in the day-to-day running of the Commune but, more than this, organised to transform the lives of working class women. They weren't satisfied with piece-meal reforms; they were demanding a wholesale revolution, with gender equality at its heart.

CANCEL CULTURE & TRANS RIGHTS

Natalia Cassidy

Much is said in the right-wing press about 'cancel culture'; the phenomenon of people facing a public backlash for things that they have said or done in the past.

Cancel culture, what it is and how it operates, is laid out capably and convincingly by left-wing Youtuber Natalie Wynn, known as ContraPoints, in her video "Canceling". In this she lays out the way in which cancel culture operates. A particular viewpoint or action (confirmed or alleged) by an individual or group is abstracted and essentialised into an often vague assertion about the character or nature of that individual or group. On that basis, they are deemed beyond the pale. They must be shunned and isolated. Others, deemed to be too close, are then at risk of isolation themselves if they do not join in disavowal of the cancelled party.

Some on the left have denied that this phenomenon exists at all, instead claiming that what is happening is simply people experiencing consequences for their wrongdoing or harmful opinions.

Cancel culture does exist, though it is not what the right-wing media continually rails against. Those in the *Sunday Times* that have regular column space to talk about how transgender women are inherently predatory are not "being cancelled" when they get criticised on Twitter. These commentators have huge reach and sufficient social capital to resist any fallout that comes from backlash from left wingers on social media.

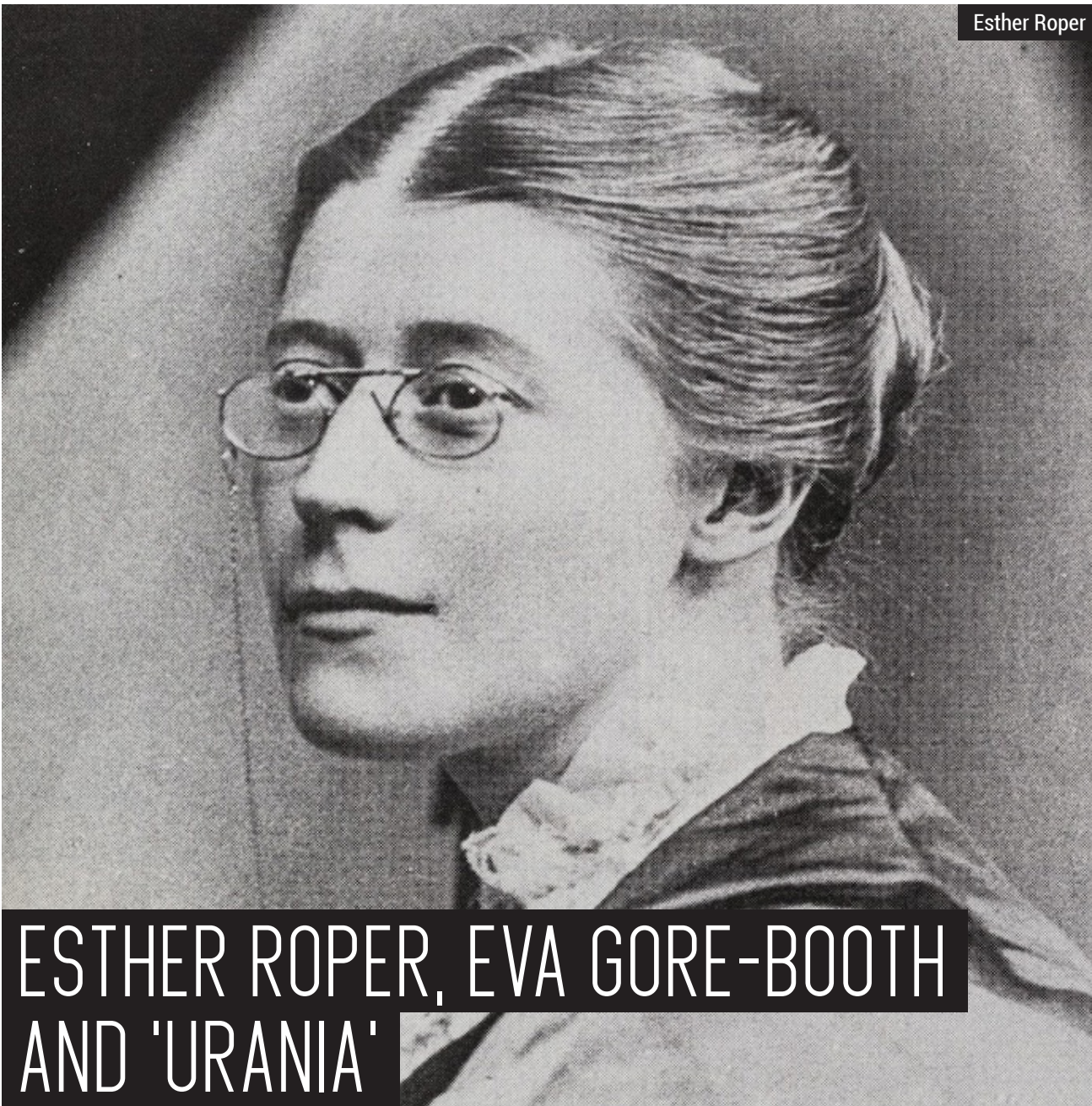
Instead, cancel culture affects much less powerful people. Many people have little to no knowledge of transphobia, what forms it takes or how different strains of feminism have historically related to trans women. In the UK we have a very vocal and quite prominent layer of left-wing feminists and trade unionists that believe, wrongly, that trans women pose an existential threat to the safety and rights of women. Many people who know very little about the issues around trans rights, but who respect these feminists for the work they have done over the years in the women's movement and the labour movement, may well superficially take on these arguments. Many of these people have not hardened into fully-crystallised transphobes. If the left is unwilling to engage with these people and simply disavow them because of their current views then the left will be unable to make any progress past a small layer of self-righteous Twitter accounts.

The ability for people to resist social ostracism inevitably rests upon their existing social links and position within the established order of things. Those who are most vulnerable to cancel culture are inevitably rank-and-file activists without a platform or voice and not bourgeois journalists sounding off in their Sunday columns.

• See 'Canceling' by ContraPoints at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjMPJVmXxV8>



During the final weeks of the Commune, rumours circulated that working class women - dubbed *pétroleuses* - were committing arson. Many were killed by Versailles troops. Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray wrote in his memoirs: "Every woman who was badly dressed, or carrying a milk-can, a pail, an empty bottle, was pointed out as a pétroleuse, her clothes torn to tatters, she was pushed against the nearest wall, and killed with revolver-shots".



ESTHER ROPER, EVA GORE-BOOTH AND 'URANIA'

Jill Mountford

Esther Roper and Eva Gore Booth had lived and worked together for twenty years when they, along with three others, launched their magazine *Urania*. It was 1916, the middle of the First World War. Less than three months earlier, 485 people had been killed in the Easter Rising in Dublin and Eva's sister, Constance Markiewicz, had escaped execution for her part in the rebellion on the grounds of her sex.

Urania, however, was not an outlet for Esther and Eva's anti-war activism. Nor was it a magazine targeting the tens of thousands of working class women they had organised with in the suffrage and trade union movements over the previous two decades. Instead, *Urania* was magazine seeking to challenge the idea that gender is fixed and to confront the constraints of the gender binary, heterosexual marriage and conformity to gender stereotypes. It promoted the idea that we should strive for an 'ideal gender': an androgyny that comprises the best characteristics of both genders.

The women's movement in the early part of the twentieth century was made up of radical, socialist and bourgeois feminists and was increasingly rich and varied in its perspectives on women's inequality. Though the mainstream of that movement was focused on the right to vote and challenging inequality in the workplace, there had been consistent discussion in many different feminist publications around the construction of gender and the role it plays in women's oppression.

Urania, however, stands out as especially radical and pioneering. The magazine celebrated love between women, same sex marriage and cross-dressing. It derided

heterosexual marriage and argued that society should "discard sex", meaning not just gender but the act of heterosexual sex and by implication, all sex, arguing for a spiritual, romantic friendship above 'animalistic sex'.

In the 1930s it covered sex change stories. When the champion athlete Mary Weston changed sex to become Mark Weston, *Urania* declared it as 'Another Extraordinary Triumph' - a stark contrast to radical feminist attitudes towards transgender athletes today. The article goes on to argue that is is further proof that "sex is an accident" and "no determinant of character and personality." This is progressive and rare, if not unique, for the time.

The title of the magazine, *Urania*, is interesting. The word "Uranian" is used by Edward Carpenter, socialist, gay rights campaigner and mystic in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to mean "those whose lives and activities are inspired by genuine friendship or love for their own sex."

Eva, particularly, was increasingly taking on a mystic view of the world by 1916 and, like many feminists of the time, she was flirting with theosophy (she became a fully certificated member of the Theosophical Society in June 1919). Theosophy was a sort of new age religion that talked of many things, including gender fluidity through reincarnation. It promoted celibacy, arguing that love should exist on the spiritual plane rather than the physical, an idea that was increasingly expressed in articles of the magazine.

Annie Besant, a well-known socialist feminist, was one of the first British feminists to get involved with Theosophy in

the 1890s. A couple of years later, Charlotte Despard, also a socialist feminist, gave up on Catholicism in exchange for Theosophy. Olive Banks, the feminist historian, says that from a list of well-known feminists in the late-19th and early-20th centuries around ten percent got involved with theosophy at some point.

Radical feminism, theosophy, vegetarianism and animal welfare united the editorial board of *Urania*. Irene Clyde, Dorothy Cornish and Jessey Wade were the other founder-editors.

Irene is often retrospectively celebrated as a transgender woman though, no doubt because of constraints of the period, she spent her working life as Thomas Baty. Baty was an international lawyer and worked from 1916 as a loyal servant and apologist for the Japanese government. He lived, worked and died in Japan aged 85. While Baty was certainly a trailblazer in challenging the gender binary - as he put it: "insistent differentiation - his radicalism did not translate to a big world view. As Irene Clyde she published a radical feminist utopian novel in 1909, *Beatrice the Sixteenth*. In the early parts of the story, Irene consciously avoids the use of gendered pronouns, but as the book progresses she increasingly uses the pronoun 'she' and celebrates feminine characteristics - the same characteristics that *Urania* argues are used to oppress women and portray them as inferior.

Between the 1920s and 1960s interest in feminist ideas faded, but this magazine with all its eccentricities kept on going. Producing four issues a year it was distributed to a private, on-request or by-personal-introduction readership of around 200-250 worldwide, including Japan, Nepal and New Zealand. It was, however, subscribed to by four university libraries, two in the UK and two in the US, suggesting a potentially greater readership than those private subscribers. The magazine was free to those interested in challenging gender conformity.

None of the editors were especially energetic evangelists for the new 'ideal gender'. There was no overall persuasive strategy of how to get from a world where "insistent differentiation" is a relic of the past to a world where we are all liberated from suffocating socially-constructed gender norms. The best on offer was a suggestion that readers get in touch if they are interested in establishing a 'Modern Abbey', "where people of our opinions could live in common, careless of the public's comments." The 'Modern Abbey' sounds like spiritual and possibly celibate mini-utopia. The pronoun 'she' is used when describing this paradise.

Esther Roper and Eva Gore Booth had a long history of fighting for women's equality before the launch of *Urania*. Esther worked to exhaustion engaging working class women in Manchester in fight for their right to vote. Doing work the Pankhurst's WSPU would never do, Esther focused her work on working class women and their trade unions. She was very much a suffragist, not a suffragette, although in the early years she was a mentor to Christabel Pankhurst.

Eva Gore Booth was from the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. She was recruited to the fight for women's suffrage by Esther in 1896. From then on they were barely parted. Esther and Eva worked together in Manchester forming a highly productive working relationship with Sarah Reddish, Sarah Dickenson and Selina Cooper. In 1903, together they founded the Lancashire and Cheshire Women Textile and Other Workers' Representation Committee.

Esther and Eva campaigned for the rights of flower sellers, barmaids, women trapeze artists and pit brow women to work in their trades against sexist legislation set to ban them from their industries. They set up the Barmaids Defence League and won their campaign. An inspiring and rich story to be told next time.

TENANTS' ORGANISING AND FEMINISM



An interview with Jo Hiley, ACORN and Labour activist in Sheffield

Why get involved with ACORN?

I've been involved with ACORN since arriving in Sheffield in late 2017. I knew they were proactively organising at a local level with something of a left analysis, and wanted to get a sense of how that was working. By the time I ran for chair last year, ACORN was at an interesting point in its UK life; following the 2019 general election result it was considering its role as a vehicle for radical change at the national level. It had also rapidly expanded its number of branches and started looking at issues beyond the tenants' organising that it initially became known for. Having been founded as a 'community union', early listening work demonstrated how important tenant and housing rights were for the UK working class, which led to a focus on that, but there had always been the intention to link that work to broader issues rather than remaining a single-issue organisation. I was really keen to be involved in that process.

How has that linking to broader political issues been going?

I think that remains to be seen; the shift is still ongoing. ACORN recently passed a 'national platform', which is exciting because it's the first time that they have done anything like that. It includes policy stances that go from workers' control to housing and the climate emergency. Crucially, members can vote for changes via a national conference. The question this raises for the organisation is to what extent ACORN creates internal space for political discussion and debate; something that many founding members and staff view as obstructive to a focus on direct action.

Many of the early moves towards non-housing issues have come directly from community listening exercises, such as a campaign for local bus ownership, or traffic-calming on a particular street. Moving forward, it's unclear how listening and political reflections will interact: for example, one big listening exercise I took part in on a Sheffield estate brought up fears around safety and crime. Without a firm analysis of

institutions like the police, there's a risk of taking action in a regressive direction.

ACORN UK is heavily influenced by the work of Saul Alinsky, who is often associated with approaching organising as an end in itself, or the belief that identifying any issue that local people care about and organising around it is inherently radical and good. Since Alinsky's most influential book was partly intended as a disavowal of communism, we need to be wary of where that takes us.

Another potential risk of this approach is that you wind up focusing on things like pedestrian crossings – which might be appreciated by the community but at the cost of losing a radical purpose.

What is the significance of Acorn and tenants' organisation for women?

I think that in terms of getting women involved in political organising, ACORN shows a lot of potential, particularly given it often takes housing as a starting point. Working-class women are massively disproportionately affected by housing issues – not only because they earn less through the gender pay gap; but they are much more likely to be in social housing, to have sole caring responsibilities, to spend longer at home. Women's refuges also continue to be shut, and there are an increasing number of stories coming out along the lines of the 'sex for rent' scandal that ACORN uncovered a few years ago.

I have experience of being on a council house waiting list as a child with a single parent – and growing up in the countryside, the lack of investment in housing meant that we had to move 20 miles away from my other parent and from my school. That led to the usual trap where you have to spend more money and time on transport to keep your life going.

One time I was doorknocking in Sheffield and there was a

single mother with a kid who was disabled, and the council had put him in a flat with no step-free access or storage space for his wheelchair, making him effectively housebound and obliging his mother to spend lots of time at home looking after him. The vast majority of doorstep stories I've heard along those lines have come from women, usually women without support from a partner.

The point is, it's a really good issue to start with if you want to build the involvement of working-class women in politics. It's also a really good issue for connecting the issues that they are facing with wider class concerns around property ownership and exploitation.

In terms of embedding that wider political perspective within ACORN, at the grassroots level there's often enthusiasm for thinking about what, for example, being 'anti-landlord' actually means. I feel encouraged that there seems to be an increase in creative approaches to making the connection between housing and wider class structures, like the Liverpool group showing films about rent strikes. With the nationwide expansion of branches we're seeing more experimentation and more organic connections being made between learning through direct action and learning in other ways. There's a vocal proportion of staff and national committee members who tend to discourage that sort of thing, which I think is a mistake.

In terms of recruiting and involving working-class women, ACORN are doing well. They run a lot of individual member-defence cases for women members, are alert to opportunities to develop confidence or responsibility, and encourage women to take prominent roles on committees or speaking to the press. As in many left-wing groups, where they occasionally fall down is in continuing that support once women activists have grown in confidence and become more likely to dissent, at which point assertiveness encounters less acceptance than men might enjoy.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Eduardo Tovar

The term “emotional labour” is now widely used in left-wing circles. Indeed, it is often stretched to mean seemingly any emotionally demanding human activity. For example, in the context of student activism, one might hear it used to denote the act of suppressing personal frustration whilst explaining an experienced aspect of oppression to others.

Such use of “emotional labour” extends the concept far beyond what Arlie Russell Hochschild meant when she coined the term in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, now a classic text in the sociology of emotions.

To be clear, this is not simply a difference between lay and professional uses of the term. Many social scientists have pushed emotional labour’s conceptual boundaries over the decades. Nevertheless, I believe that expanding the notion of emotional labour significantly beyond its original contours risks losing much of what made it analytically useful to begin with.

Specifically, Hochschild used “emotional labour” to denote “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” that is “sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value”. Such labour “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others...and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality”.

In other words, emotional labour frequently involves a certain estrangement from an aspect of one’s self. This recalls Erich Fromm’s remark, in *Marx’s Concept of Man*, that the salesman might be “even more alienated today than the skilled manual worker” because he is “forced to sell his ‘personality,’ his smile, his opinions in the bargain”.

Hochschild formulated the concept of emotional labour in the course of her empirical research on workers whose occupations require them to learn and use emotional management techniques. She especially draws on her detailed case study of flight attendants, whose gender ratio at the time was even more disproportionately female than it is today. Many of the book’s most insightful moments are in its examination of (i) the often hidden personal costs of regularly managing one’s emotions for commercial purposes and (ii) the inventive strategies workers employ to cope with these costs:

“Among themselves, flight attendants build up an alternative way of experiencing a smile or the word ‘girl’ – a way that involves anger and joking and mutual support on the job. And in their private lives – driving back home on the freeway, talking quietly with a loved one, sorting it out in the occasional intimacy of a worker-to-worker talk – they separate the company’s meaning of anger from their own

meaning, the company rules of feeling from their own. They try to reclaim the managed heart.”

Despite Hochschild’s use of Marxian terminology, her direct inspiration came from the work of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, especially his 1951 book *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. Still, one can understand why the concept of emotional labour is important to Marxist and feminist writers.

Women are overrepresented in service jobs that demand friendliness and deference to customers. In occupations where the self-management of feeling is not part of one’s regular work, women’s additional emotional labour tends to go unremunerated, which partly contributes to the gender pay gap.

In both cases, this is because of the sexist assumption that, as women are just “better at emotions”, it is “natural” for women to perform emotional labour, especially where it involves care or empathy. Far from reflecting an inherent predisposition or skill, the way that women are disproportionately expected to be emotional managers is itself part of the social construction of gender.

In Hochschild’s terminology, the act of regulating one’s emotions in a private setting without a wage and without producing exchange value is “emotion work” rather than “emotional labour”. This can occur in ritualistic situations where the participant is expected to feel a certain way, such as when a bride internally prompts herself to feel happy at her wedding. Emotion work is also commonly performed when trying to maintain relationships, including in the household.

This brings us back to the issue of extending the boundaries of “emotional labour” into what Hochschild instead termed “emotion work”.

Emotional labour justifiably has some conceptual elasticity. Firstly, there are occupations such as fashion modelling where one is often compelled to continue honing job-related emotional management techniques far beyond one’s working hours because one’s employability depends on it.

Secondly, one could argue that, even where there is no direct link between the management of one’s emotions and the production of exchange value, private emotion work is still central to capitalism: it is part of the process that enables the workforce to turn up at work each day to generate profit and should therefore be considered labour. One could conceptualise this in terms of emotion work producing exchange value indirectly or in terms of emotion work reproducing the capital relation.

Thirdly, dependence on one’s partner or family for shelter, finances, etc, creates a strong compulsion to manage one’s

emotions in both the household and the workplace. Women are especially likely to experience this. One sees it in cases of male-to-female domestic violence where women make themselves focus on their abusive partner’s “positive side” in order to preserve their relationship and, by extension, their material security.

Nevertheless, the conceptual elasticity of emotional labour should have limits. The more one stretches “emotional labour” to cover any activity involving emotional exertion, the more it obscures the very kind of exploitation, alienation, and dependency under capitalism that the term was supposed to highlight in the first place.

As for the suggestion that all emotion management should be considered labour because it is central to capitalism, this conflates the act of producing the preconditions for value-creation with the act of value-creation itself. Such conflation obscures how, by bringing workers together at the point of production and giving them common material interests, wage-labour in the workplace (including waged emotional labour) produces a collective subject in a way that private emotion work performed in isolation cannot.

Additionally, the conceptual overstretching of emotional labour can easily serve as a cynical excuse for derogations of responsibility in the context of political organising. That is, it makes it easier for activists to refuse to perform an agreed task that they find taxing or unpleasant by hyperbolically claiming it to be “emotional labour”.

In the decades since *The Managed Heart*’s publication, we have seen the growth of new jobs in the care sector and the emergence of a “marketised private life” in the space between home and work, where family tasks are increasingly “outsourced” commercially. All this raises pressing questions for us as socialist feminists and labour organisers.

More than ever, emotional labour is a crucial instrument in our conceptual toolkit, but we should always exercise informed judgement as to whether it is the appropriate tool for the job.

• Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 2012)

• For a recent interview with Hochschild on the conceptual stretching of emotional labour, and what she now thinks is and is not emotional labour, see Julie Beck, “The Concept Creep of ‘Emotional Labor’” (The Atlantic, 26 November 2018): <https://bit.ly/3c2US7w>



WAGES FOR IMMIGRATION?

Cathy Nugent

• This article responds to Ashley J Bohrer's article, 'Wages for Immigration', *Spectre* (Spring, 2020).

Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) is a theoretical framework for all kinds of work that reproduces capitalist accumulation at different levels, often for free within the home but also on the cheap. It asks: why do women still do most of the housework? Why are some jobs, typically women's jobs, so badly paid?

SRT argues that maintaining structures of inequality and social institutions such as the nuclear family are useful to capitalist accumulation. For example, child labour has been illegal for some time in the developed world and children no longer help make profit. Instead, they need to be fed and cared for into adulthood. The problem of lack of productivity can be minimised if this carework is squeezed out of parents (usually mothers) at cost to the family, or badly-paid nannies, nursery workers and school workers.

Ashley J Bohrer's article, 'Wages for Immigration' (*Spectre*, Spring 2020), argues that immigration is a form of social reproduction; in contrast to the more common position that immigration and anti-migrant racism create the conditions for a system of highly racialised social reproduction, in which, for example, low-paid domestic work is predominantly done by black and brown people for well-off white people.

Social Reproduction Theory understands acts of childcare as central to the reproduction of the next generation of workers, or "generational replacement". Bohrer argues that this work is often viewed too narrowly, as only the "work of sexual and domestic reproduction: gestating, bearing and rearing working-class children along with all the physical and emotional labour this process requires."

Bohrer argues that childbearing in the 'first world' capitalist

societies like the US has become less common. Women are having fewer children than earlier generations and are not replacing the workforce in sufficient numbers. Immigration, instead, is fulfilling the "replacement need" of capitalism. She points out that the US migrants and their US-born children account for 88% of population growth.

All of the exertions and tribulations associated with immigration – upending one's life and livelihood and the often harrowing challenges faced when crossing borders – should be, according to Bohrer, understood as labour, as human beings acting on the world and transforming it. This experience, of making oneself a migrant, shapes the future social and economic conditions in which migrants find themselves, and, in a world of border controls and work visas, mass immigration means large numbers of undocumented and precarious workers, many of them subject to especially harsh exploitation. The more undocumented people there are in an economy, the more surplus labour can be extracted, as bosses can drive down pay and conditions, with little fear of unionisation or industrial action.

Bohrer raises the important point that immigration challenges the view held by many social reproduction theorists that the continued primacy of the nuclear family is crucial to generating unpaid, social reproductive labour. Immigration breaks up nuclear families. Individuals leave their native countries to find work in higher-wage economies. Dependent family members are sent to live with relatives when parents migrate. Deportees are forced to part from partners and children.

Overall, Bohrer aims for a more nuanced reading of both immigration and social reproduction and these are definitely interesting arguments. I don't think she quite succeeds, however. She fails to make a sustained case for immigration as generational replacement on two counts:

Generational replacement within the family under capitalism was never just about the replacement of bodies but also about ideological conditioning: setting up patterns of atomisation, breaking up possibilities of wider social solidarity.

The relationship between immigration and modern capitalism is complicated by racist and xenophobic politics, which are not always in line with the immediate economic needs of the capitalist class. The drive to close borders and deport immigrant communities is popular in spite of the usefulness of cheap migrant labour, for instance.

Bohrer ends her article by raising the demand for wages for immigration, adopting the 'wages for...' slogan popularised by the Wages for Housework campaign in the 1970s. The 'wages for housework' demand sought to call attention to unpaid, undervalued work in the home.

Similarly, Bohrer argues that Marxist feminists must call for migrants to be remunerated for the work of making themselves migrants. The demand is ultimately an engagement in polemic and rhetoric, raised in order to expose what is bad about the systems of exploitation and oppression under which we live. It is a utopian demand, not concerned with how it might be implemented, which begs the question of how it can take the struggle one step, another step – the many steps forward needed to dismantle those systems.

While we do sometimes need to dramatise exploitation and oppression, more than anything we need to build the labour movement and raise demands for such things as the closure of all detention centres, the abolition of immigration controls. These are hard struggles to win, especially as we have lost on Brexit, that need solid, detailed arguments.

PREGNANCY, ABORTION & THE WOMEN'S STRIKE

Kelly Rogers

• A response to Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against the Family*, (Verso, 2019).

At the heart of Sophie Lewis's 2019 book, *Full Surrogacy Now*, is the argument that gestation, or pregnancy, is work. Much like advocates of wages for housework, who she refers to extensively, she argues that, by reproducing the workforce (very literally), pregnancy and childbirth are a fundamental part of value-creation; of capitalist accumulation. Pregnancy and childbirth should, therefore, (a.) be considered 'labour' in the Marxist sense and (b.) be viewed as an urgent site of struggle against capitalism.

The analogy continues when Lewis raises the demand 'wages for gestators'. This, she explains, is not an actually desired outcome, but a "provocation". She writes,

"we aren't literally totting up a bill when we utter our stick-'em-up, claiming the wages due for centuries of baby making... We are demanding everything. That - not some pragmatic state-implemented basic income program for families - is the point of "serving notice" to the expropriators; "Wages for all gestation-work" is not a petition and it does not describe an exciting destination... It describes a process of assault on wage society. It's a noir joke, a provocation, an insurgent orientation intended to expose the ludicrousness of treating work as the

basis for receiving greater or smaller amounts of the means of survival"

GOING ON 'STRIKE'

Lewis underpins her argument with an uncontroversial assessment of the commercial surrogacy industry. Commercial surrogacy, unlike unpaid housework or unpaid pregnancy, directly makes profit for the employer and surrogates are straightforwardly exploited workers. They receive a wage, which is less than the product of their labour is worth, and their conditions are dictated by their contract of employment.

These wages and conditions are very often especially poor. Lewis describes how surrogates are expected to adhere to strict health routines and to live in housing away from their families. They often don't bring the baby to term, but are booked in for a caesarian section at the convenience of the clients.

If gestation is work, then how do these workers go on strike? The answer, Lewis argues, is simple: abortion. Surrogates ultimately have the power to 'withdraw their labour' by terminating their pregnancies. Lewis gives examples of surrogates threatening to abort unless they are given permission to see their families.

At this point, however, readers are expected to make a rather extraordinary leap and accept that, if commercial surrogates can strike for better conditions, then so can any pregnant person. Gestators, in general, can 'strike' to better their lives - and when they do, they strike a blow against the oppressive constraints of the nuclear family under capitalism.

THE WOMEN'S STRIKE

On 24 October 1975, ninety percent of women in Iceland went on strike to protest the gender pay gap and

discriminatory employment practices. They did not go to their paid jobs and left housework and childcare to the men. Fathers were forced to take their children into work and employers ended up providing crayons and sweets. Certain industries, such as fish factories, shut down entirely for the day. Iceland passed a law guaranteeing equal pay the following year.

Inspired by this action, the Women's Strike has been adopted by activists in a number of countries around the world, most successfully in Poland and Argentina. A limitation of the women's strike is that, for very obvious reasons, an all-out, long-term strike just isn't possible. Children need looking after, and women tend to want to look after them, at least some of the time. Nevertheless, one can still see how direct actions like the 'women's day off' in Iceland or the Black Friday protests in Poland can be very effective, especially when taken up on a large scale.

However, given that, generally speaking, people have children because they want to and would presumably be unwilling to have an abortion for a token action, Lewis's notion of 'gestational strikes' ends up as little more than a rhetorical device.

Perhaps I have taken Lewis too seriously on this point. Afterall, she explicitly says that wages for gestators is a "noir joke"; the same may be true of 'gestational strikes'. But that is precisely the problem with an otherwise thought-provoking book. One of its central arguments is a (not particularly convincing) "provocation"; an intellectual exercise that offers us very little for the real-world project we have before us: overthrowing capitalism and its related systems of oppression.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN PRISONS

Sara Lee

At a recent *Spectre Journal* event, editor Charlie Post pointed out that neither left class reductionists nor liberal identitarians situate mass incarceration in the development of capitalism. Calvin John Smiley, one of the speakers, responded that intersectionality is the "marrying of these different arguments into an overlapping theoretical framework."

At best, intersectionality describes mass incarceration but does not explain it. The prison population is overwhelmingly black and overwhelmingly working-class. But *why* are prisoners at the intersection of race and class?

Any theoretical framework which situates mass incarceration in the development of capitalism must understand prisons as sites of social reproduction and prisoners as a reserve army of labour.

What is distinct about the reserve army of labour is that its workers sell their labour power at a lower price. Under capitalism, this labour-reserve is racialised, not only by employers but also by workers. Workers fend off labour market competition by racialising those who are undercutting their wages. Employers sort 'superior' workers from the 'inferior' ones on the basis of fictional racial characteristics.

As a result of racialised oppression, workers in the reserve army of labour are discriminated against in employment, housing, and education. And disparity in these areas is what accounts for working-class people of colour being over-

represented in the prison population. But the prison population itself is a reserve army of labour, because of the conditions by which it reproduces labour power. Prison labour power costs less to reproduce than ordinary labour power and will always serve to undercut the general wage level.

While capitalism perpetuates mass incarceration through the production of racial differences, mass incarceration perpetuates capitalist relations of production through the guaranteed (re)production of a reserve army of labour. The continued existence of a scab army of labour drives wages down in the long term; provides cheap labour for the state, if not the private sector; and provides technologically backward industries the low-cost labour they need to maintain their profitability.

In 2015, union-busting laws introduced by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker coincided with the state's enlistment of prison labour to perform landscaping and maintenance tasks across the state - tasks that had historically been performed by unionised public sector employees. The effect of the deployment of prisoners as a scab army of labour is not just a downward pressure on wage levels in the public sector, but on the market price for labour more generally.

As Smiley argued, even if capitalists don't hire prison labour, the public sector benefits greatly from cheap prison labour. During the pandemic, New York inmates were paid 10 to 62 cents an hour to make the state's own brand of hand sanitiser - which they reportedly were not allowed

to use because the alcohol content made it contraband for prisoners. Prison labour is cheap because of how its labour power is reproduced. Outside of the context of a prison, it would not be feasible for a factory worker to be paid 10 to 62 cents an hour for manufacturing hand sanitiser. Such a low wage would not allow the worker to maintain a household, where women shoulder most of the domestic labour that refreshes a worker's labour power and enables him to return to work the next day. The worker would also not be able to raise a family on that wage, which would affect the reproduction of new workers for capital.

In a prison, the prisoner often performs his own domestic labour as part of a larger regime to maintain and operate the complex. The daily schedule of inmates in North Carolina gives an insight into how prisons institutionalise reproductive labour. "At 3:30 AM, the first inmates are awakened. They are the kitchen workers who get up to prepare the morning meal...All inmate workers report to their jobs at 7:30 AM...Inmates work in the kitchen, license tag plant or laundry, or perform maintenance or janitorial tasks."

Because of the unique conditions under which labour power is reproduced in a prison, prison labour becomes a reserve army of labour in its own right. It does not merely draw from a pre-existing racialised reserve army of labour. Mass incarceration enables capitalist relations of production to survive. Any anti-capitalist programme must necessarily be an anti-carceral one.



RENT STRIKE!

Kelly Rogers

Over recent weeks, more than 5000 students across 45 UK universities have withheld rent payments and demanded a 40% reduction in rent, refunds for those not taking their places in halls, and greater financial support for students. Sky high rents have long been a problem for students and rent strikes have been a regular feature at university halls since 2015, when students at University College London launched the Cut the Rent campaign, winning £1.85 million in rent rebates, bursaries and rent freezes. The coronavirus pandemic, however, during which students have either been locked inside their accommodation with little or no outside support, or unable to attend university at all, has inspired a fresh wave of outrage. It is also significant that they have organised the strike on such a magnificent scale at a time when normal campus activity is halted and all of the usual methods of agitation - leafleting, door-knocking etc. - are unavailable to activists.

Historically, the main protagonists behind rent strikes have largely been women. Tending to be the ones responsible for managing household accounts and turning the breadwinner's wages into the means to get by, and very often making sacrifices themselves so their families might be a bit better fed, it was women that felt most harshly what it meant to be living on the breadline or at the mercy of unscrupulous landlords. Time and time again they have organised their communities and their men to do something about it. To celebrate the student rent strikes of 2021, we briefly retell the stories of two historic, women-led rent strikes from the early twentieth century.

GLASGOW, 1915

When the First World War began in 1914, thousands of workers descended on Glasgow to work in the shipyards and munitions factories on Clydeside. Spotting an opportunity to turn a profit, in February 1915 the city's landlords informed their tenants that all rents would rise by a huge 25 percent, even though housing was chronically overcrowded and dilapidated. Despite recent examples of tenants' organisation (John Maclean of the British Socialist Party had led the Scottish Federation of Tenants' Associations to fight against rent increases and for public housing in 1913), with many men away fighting, it was felt that the housewives of Glasgow would present little resistance.

How wrong they were! The Glasgow Women's Housing Association was quickly established with the support of the Independent Labour Party and Women's Labour League to protest the rent increases and, under the leadership of Mary Barbour and a number of other women, it became the driving force behind the largest rent strike in British history, beginning in Govan, the shipbuilding district on the banks of the river Clyde, in early 1915.

What followed was a militant campaign involving propaganda meetings, including at factory gates, rent strikes and eviction resistance. Women's committees were established, which met in kitchens and would share news of forthcoming evictions. Tenants staged mass demonstrations against attempted evictions, often resulting in violent confrontations in which they would defend themselves

with flour-bombs and other missiles. Empty houses were picketed to prevent new tenants that had agreed to pay higher rates from entering.

On one occasion, when one tenant was persuaded to pay the rent increase after she was led to believe that others had already done so, Mary Barbour organised thousands of women and workers from the shipyards in Govan to turn out onto the streets outside the House Factor's office. The Factor quickly handed the woman back her money.

By November 1915, 20,000 tenants were on strike across Glasgow and rent strike activity was spreading to other parts of Scotland and the UK. The British government had little option but to bring in legislation, in late 1915, which introduced rent controls. Although this was intended as a temporary measure, the tenants in Glasgow and elsewhere kept up the pressure with further rent strikes organised in the following decade. Rent controls would remain a part of the British housing settlement until the 1988 Housing Act.

The rent strike of 1915 was not a spontaneous uprising. It came at a time of rising industrial militancy. It was not long, after all, until the British government would bring tanks onto the streets of Glasgow to suppress the revolt of 'Red Clydeside' in 1919. Mary Barbour herself was also not just a housewife. She was an active socialist and member of the Independent Labour Party, who campaigned on a wide range of causes, including the vote for women, women's access to birth control and maternity benefit. She also organised Socialist Sunday Schools, a method of educating children in the core principles of socialism, first established in the 1892 London Dock Strike.

LOWER EAST SIDE, NEW YORK CITY, 1907-8

In 1907, 20-year-old Pauline Newman, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania into the Lower East Side in New York City, moved into a windowless, bathroom-less tenement. That autumn, landlords called for a rent hike.

Enlisting 400 girls and women, Newman set about organising families to demand a 20 percent decrease in rent. Although Newman needed to go to work during the day, they built an army of housewives that could go door-to-door, tenement-to-tenement and mobilise tenants to the cause. By late December, they had convinced 10,000 households to withhold rent, and the strike began.

Landlords responded by ordering evictions and shutting off the water supply to properties. Faced with the largest rent strike that New York City had ever seen, however, some landlords did agree to reduce rents, benefitting approximately 2,000 families. Moreover, out of the strike came a long-standing demand for rent controls, and it would inspire decades of tenants' activism. Rent controls would be brought into effect in New York City in the late 1930s.

Newman, dubbed the "East Side Joan of Arc" by the *New York Times*, would go on to be an impressive labour movement activist. In 1908 she was the Socialist Party candidate for secretary of state, in spite of the fact that women did not yet have the vote. She used her election campaign to advocate for women's suffrage.

She organised garment workers, too, and was a central organiser in the 'Uprising of the 20,000'; when, in November 1909, more than twenty thousand Jewish immigrants, the majority young women in their late-teens or early-twenties, held an eleven-week general strike in New York's shirtwaist industry. While the strikers won only a small portion of their demands, the action precipitated five years of struggle that would result in the garment industry becoming one of the best organised industries in the US.