

Women's Fightback



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www.workersliberty.org/women



Reverse these cuts... and more

By Cathy Nugent

Recent research* highlights how badly cuts are affecting women, particularly those with children or other caring responsibilities.

Rising unemployment and underemployment, increasing unaffordability of childcare, and benefit cuts on top of the rising cost of living add up to a very bleak picture for all working-class people. But the cuts will mean huge regression in female independence and equality.

Female unemployment is at its highest for 25 years, is rising and is growing disproportionately faster than male unemployment. 1.12 million women are "available for work" but are jobless. The background to this is the recent loss of 270,000 public sector jobs. 710,000 jobs are due to be cut by 2017. Eventually half a million women will lose their public sector job cuts.

Where jobs are being created, most are low-skilled, low-paid and part-time jobs. As single or joint-parents women will not take up those jobs if their wages do not adequately cover childcare costs.

The cost of childcare in the UK is the second highest in Europe — 26.6% of average family incomes, or 40.9% of the average wage. The cost of childcare rose by 6% last year.

The choice of childcare has been reduced by closures of Sure Start centres and after school clubs.

Financial support for bringing up children has been undermined by cuts to maternity grants and the freezing of child benefits. The maximum childcare element of Working Tax Credit has been reduced from 80% to 70% of childcare costs.

Regular surveys by workingmums.net (although not high polls) show a third of working mothers giving up work as a result of cuts to tax credit.

Cuts in housing benefit disproportionately affect women (one million more women than men claim housing benefit).

Cuts are forcing women into looking for second jobs or working more than one, (maybe highly insecure) "mini jobs" (jobs with very short hours).

For women with children, finding work is only part of the battle. Staying in work is hard if suitable childcare cannot be found, it does not "fit" with the hours of a job (the government's 15 hours per week free childcare falls short of what is needed for most jobs) and wages and in-work benefits do not cover costs.

Trying to manage all these pressures is especially tough for single parents.

All of this is happening when claimants are facing increasing pressure to find work (rule changes mean more single parents have to be "available for work").

The detailed reports which keep track of women and cuts are good reports, but are usually tailored to polite lobbying for policy change. Some propose inadequate or even half-baked "solutions".

The Women's Budget Group wants to see the reversal of cuts (a good starting point). But they champion closing tax loop holes and a "Robin Hood tax" — levy on financial transactions.

That is well short of what is needed to completely reverse the new conditions of austerity, to ensure all have the right to a useful job with reasonable hours and a decent wage, and if necessary full flexibility for caring responsibilities,

extended paid parental leave, and free childcare.

The Fawcett Society and others have called for equality impact assessments on government cuts and reforms. But more equal treatment might just mean an equitable distribution of pain between men and women. It does not mean backing down on cuts or expanding nursery places, or unravelling welfare reform.

This situation demands a massive, sustained and coherent campaign by the unions: fighting against all cuts but also pushing forward the issues that are vital to working-class women.

For now most unions are not pursuing *any* meaningful fight against the cuts; for instance, the campaign to preserve public sector pensions has dribbled away to next-to-nothing. Yet as the political storm clouds gather in Europe, the UK slips deeper into recession and the popularity of the coalition government slips, we can and should expect renewed struggles.

The TUC plans another demonstration on 20 October.

Our trade unions, student unions and anti-cuts groups could use that demonstration to bring together the people — all people, women and men — who are most badly affected by the cuts. We need to be organising for that to happen.

* Women's Budget Group, *Pre-Budget Briefing*, March 2012
Fawcett Society, *The Impact of Austerity on Women*, March 2012
Gingerbread, *It's Off to Work We Go?*, May 2012
Daycare Trust, *Childcare costs survey 2012*

Save the Women's Library!

By Jade Baker

The Women's Library, which has been housed by the London Metropolitan University for ten years, could be closed closure. The library holds the biggest collection of literature dedicated to the history of women and attracts around 30,000 visitors every year.

In March London Metropolitan's Board of Governors decided to find The Women's Library a new home or sponsor, or to run it as a skeleton service from December, reducing opening hours to one day per week.

Vice Chancellor Malcolm Gillies has said the university can no longer fund a service that is used by so many from outside the institution and that the university needs to save £50,000 a year.

What will happen to the collection if it is moved? Will it be split up? If fragmentation starts now, who knows where it will end. If private collectors gain ownership of the resources it quite possible that some (or all) of this collection could become completely inaccessible to the public.

If the collection leaves London, this will end all the great work the Library

has done with the local community.

The collection includes papers and archives from Sylvia Pankhurst and Sheila Rowbotham; a prized first edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*; suffrage banners; leaflets from the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s; records of women war workers and so on.

The library also boasts an audio collection which tells the stories of centuries of struggle by women and the working class.

There is still much to research among all the donated materials which makes it all the more important that it should be kept open as a resource particularly for the people whose lives and struggle it celebrates.

What you can do:

● The "Save the Women's Library" petition

has collected 10,351 signatures: bit.ly/wom-lib4

Follow the news (including prospects for an Early Day Motion) at Save The Women's Library blog: bit.ly/wom-lib5.

● National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts Women is promoting a mass protest letter writing campaign: bit.ly/wom-lib.

● London Metropolitan Student Union has set up an email account on the website which enables you to send that letter to the Vice Chancellor's email directly. It's a good pressure tactic and takes under a minute to sign and send off: bit.ly/wom-lib2

● Royal Holloway Feminist Society have produced a brilliant awareness campaign video. Check it out here: bit.ly/wom-lib3

● A "visit-in" to boost the numbers going to the Women's Library has been also been discussed.



Don't arrest sex workers!

By Stop the Arrests Campaign

The Stop the Arrests Campaign, a coalition of sex worker rights activists and supporters, is calling for a moratorium on arrests, detention and deportation of sex workers in London with immediate effect until the end of the Olympic Games.

Prior to the Olympics run up, anti-trafficking laws and policies were resulting in brothel raids, closures and arbitrary arrests, detention and deportation of people working in the sex industry. Such policing creates a climate of fear among workers, leaving them less likely to report crimes against them — including violence and exploitation in the industry and more vulnerable to abuse.

Lobbying groups, including charities and non-governmental organisations have sprung



up in London — many of which have no prior knowledge of the sex industry or experience of working with sex workers — citing this purported link and demanding measures such as increased law enforcement (policing) of sex work and a ban on advertising sexual services. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that large sporting events cause an increase in trafficking for prostitution.

We are aware of "clean-up efforts" underway in London, particularly east London, in the run up to the Olympics. These include multiple raids and closure of premises. We anticipate that until the end of the Olympic games there will be a continued rise in the numbers of

raids, arrests, deportations and level of harassment of sex workers.

The closure of brothels and flats leaves sex workers without premises from which to work, often forcing them onto the street, where they are more likely to be heavily policed, attacked or assaulted.

We want the Mayor of London and London Metropolitan police, in co-operation with the UK Border Agency to,

1. Suspend offences that refer directly to sex workers: soliciting and prosecution for working collectively under brothel keeping laws

2. Suspend arrests of sex workers, administrative detention and/or deportation, during the enforcement of offences relating to third parties, namely causing, inciting or controlling for gain.

3. Suspend the closure of premises through the use of closure orders and notices.

● moratorium2012.org

Can drama be feminist?

By Sarah Weston

In the study of arts-based subjects, the tendency might be to apply theories ("isms") to pieces of art as a kind of critique, as a way of approaching a text, etc, from a certain perspective, in order to write a convincing essay.

For example, I remember being asked to write an essay by choosing a play, and choosing two critical theories to critique it with. Although I think it is more insightful to approach a playtext with the broadness of a political or social context, trying to interpret anything I could find in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* as "socialist feminist" is not very helpful.

First, "isms" are being treated homogeneously, as if they are all equal and can be applied equally, depending on which one suits which play better. It is removing them from their purpose as a constant social/political/economic critique of our own society, and instead being a way to understand a piece of art better.

The theories themselves are not criticised, and not understood as things that are alive and need to be practically applied in reality: socialist feminism becomes a critical tool to be used alongside psychoanalysis, or post-colonialism, or Foucault.

Without even getting into the political problems with this, I think it also misses how great political art works.

A piece of drama that is considered socialist feminist does not arise out of examining the writings of socialist feminists. It arises out of the real life problems facing women of that time. The writer has potentially read feminist literature, but that influences in so far as it gives her the perspective to view the world in a certain way, not provide a rule book to her playwrighting. If we were to watch a play that made clever little references to feminist theory, demonstrating how well read the author was in feminist literature, we would find it too self-conscious, and not interesting as drama, as it would no longer be about real people.

So there are two issues here: how useful is it to study already existing texts as feminist, and how do we create new work that is feminist? Yes, plays should be analysed within a political framework, and they can be used to demonstrate our ideas. But numerous practitioners have identified this as problematic.

Plays tend to be dramas of psychology, and are concerned with the relations of individuals, rather than wider society. This is obviously not true of every piece of theatre, but I think it is more referring to how audiences view plays.

Practitioners such as Brecht were concerned with audience viewing drama on-stage as something separate to their own lives, and only true of the characters on stage. A play is feminist because of the conflicts and relations of characters on stage, but this only matters if the ideas go further than the playtext, otherwise it is not a feminist play, it is a play about the characters.

On the other hand, when it comes to cre-

ating new work, there is a danger of practitioners becoming overly concerned with making it political. Didactic plays that hammer a message into the audience are some of the most boring and awful things to watch, and I think leave the viewer just as passive.

If someone does want to use feminist theory as starting point to creating new work I think it is more interesting to look to what we already have within drama itself.

Take ideas of performativity. Judith Butler wrote extensively on this matter, particularly gender performativity. In very basic terms, performativity is about how language and other actions construct, consolidate and regulate us to perform behaviours. Butler takes this further to demonstrate that gender is performative. Gender is rehearsed like a script, and we are the actors that make the script a reality through repetition of the language and actions.

If we take these ideas into the rehearsal room, we are already within our median of performance. If we look at gender as performance, non-conscious performance regulated by society as a whole, what happens if we enter the very conscious performance space of a rehearsal room, or a theatre? How can we layer these different ideas of performativity? When are we performing and not performing anymore? Who becomes audience?

The difference here is that we are not pushing theoretical ideas into a play, but we are developing them, we are going deeper into them, they become practice.

Of course you cannot create every feminist piece about performativity, I am using it to exemplify how theory into practice comes from a different way of thinking about it.

You could have a play that ticks all the right boxes politically, makes excellent socialist feminist arguments, but reads like a manifesto and leaves you with no real feeling. There is no aesthetic response to this. You might as well read the literature it came from instead.

Practical demonstration of theory in performance is much more complex than this: it cannot just be about reciting the right lines. It needs deep exploration of an idea in all matter of manifestations. How do you show this idea physically, musically, silently? What tools have we got: have we used our whole body, have we used the whole space, have we maximised on our relationship with the audience?

If we are looking at previously written texts, it is not just about how they demonstrate the lives of women at the time, but how can the ideas resonate now? Are they still alive? Can we re-invent them?

Studying drama theory and practice with feminism has to be approached like any form of materialism: it must be constantly renewed and reinterpreted.

• Sarah is a Drama with Philosophy graduate who is currently working as co-creator, writer and performer in emerging theatre company blueDragonfly Productions.

Lines of enquiry

By Sarah Weston

"The Bridge" was the latest BBC4 programmed Scandinavian crime dramas, which sentenced it to inevitable comparisons with previous successes such as "The Killing".

As someone who really rated "The Killing", I initially fell into this trap: being dissatisfied by the first couple of episodes, wanting "The Killing" theme music to kick in, etc. But by about halfway through I think "The Bridge" definitely held its own, and managed to keep the intensity of drama throughout, whereas I feel "The Killing" began to tail off towards the end.

This came from investment in the characters from the beginning, although at first the characters of the lead detectives felt contrived; their personalities hammered at the audience rather than being subtly discovered.

Yet in some ways this paid off in the long run: a) we could see a clear character development and b) it contributed to the overall drama of the series. Yes initially over-doing character personalities is very annoying, but it did mean that as the case they were investigating began to affect their personal and not just professional life, it was more satisfying for an audience, in the sense of there being more at stake.

This leads to a more political analysis of the series.

What at first separated this programme from others, for me, was the idea that the motive for crime was coming from a larger political and social idea. Through a journalist, the perpetrator identifies five problems with society (such as homelessness, people not being equal before law, etc), and matches his murders accordingly.

The reactions to the murders then become more interesting: people label him as a "truth terrorist"; making ethical decisions falls on the heads of big business owners; and people in some sense have some agreement with what he is saying. The



Saga Noren, detective in "The Bridge"

A positive view of Asperger's?

By Janine Booth

Detective Saga Noren in "The Bridge" was fairly clearly high-functioning autistic, having Asperger Syndrome or being somewhere nearby on the autistic spectrum.

This portrayal was, I felt, broadly positive. Saga is an intelligent woman, capable in her field of work, with focus and a useful detachment.

Her personal and emotional life was atypical, but not in a particularly negative way. Her autistic-literal thinking was shown in

crimes seem much bigger than the actions of one individual.

However, as the case unravels, we see the actions move from being socially/politically motivated to being entirely based in the individual's psychology. The five problems that were identified are forgotten about, and are lumped with the rest of the redundant evidence, or the now innocent suspects.

This shift is significant because it conforms to what is predominant in most narra-

amusing ways too: on one occasion in a nightclub, a man she fancied offered her a drink and walked away bemused when she refused; she followed him to explain that she refused the drink because she was not thirsty (obviously), but would he like to come back to her place for sex?

This was a utopian portrayal of an adult Aspie woman: there is no sign of the distress that can come from being at odds with a society that does not accept that humanity is neurologically diverse. But that is no bad thing.

tives in film, television, theatre, etc: focus on the individual rather than society. It conforms to the perspective of world from the individual: things happen because of a person's psychology, not because of the wider social/political/economic situation.

What is more, arguably, from choosing to shift from one to the other, "The Bridge" perhaps even implies that the idea that bad things happening because of social problems was just another wrong line of enquiry.

Anti-fascism must not be anti-women

By Rebecca

Hope Not Hate's efforts to bring down fascist organisations in the UK are admirable. I'm sure Nick Lowles, the main force behind the campaign, was pleased with the wipe-out of local BNP council seats in the recent elections. For his efforts in these results, I commend him.

However, my initial response to seeing his blog post on 30 March "Let's stop the racist pornographer"

was derision. Of course I agree that Steve Squire, owner of a sex shop and alleged seller of date rape drugs is not a suitable person to be in the London Assembly. But on reading other posts Lowles has placed on his blog, I found his sudden feminist sensibilities a little hard to believe.

Just under a year ago, he posted another article: "Jenny Griffin's a busy girl". The photo he used was equally titillating. Probably for Myspace, a teenage

Jenny had taken a pic of herself from above in her underwear and some heavy eye makeup. I read on, via Facebook, not knowing very much about Nick Griffin's daughter. The article was not about her. She was mentioned in two or three sentences during the six paragraphs about upcoming BNP election bids.

I complained about the irrelevant and offensive use of the picture. Other women also expressed their discomfort with the picture.

We were challenged thus: Why are you defending her? What's the fuss about? She isn't a woman, she's a nasty fascist who deserves everything she gets. We should use every weapon in our arsenal against these racist scum. We aren't taking it down. It stays. Why are you still making a fuss? You're missing the point. You're distracting from the real issue of taking down the BNP.

We insisted. We pointed out that this wasn't the way

we wanted to win.

Lowles eventually took the picture down, making clear it was under duress and grudgingly done. I suspect he would do it again.

I shouldn't be surprised that a blog affiliated with the *Mirror* took this kind of tack, but I was shocked at the attitude we encountered from fellow anti-oppression warriors. They genuinely didn't get it.

Whenever I see pictures of BNP women taken on protests, it is often followed

by comments about their appearance, and nasty, animalistic insults. I no longer "like" Hope Not Hate on Facebook.

There is no hierarchy in who should be free from oppression. We don't defer one group's emancipation while we defend someone else's freedom. We don't treat our enemy as subhuman to make it easier to hate them.

If I have to wait in line for my rights at the revolution, I don't want to come.

Challenge "rape culture"!

By Heather

The sorry saga of Ched Evans, the Sheffield United player found guilty of rape, has revealed the alarming prevalence of what has become known as "rape culture" — the unquestioned acceptance of myths around sexual violence.

Rape Crisis identifies these myths as including: that rape happens because women are outside alone at night; because women dress or behave "provocatively"; because women don't say "no" clearly enough; because women were drunk; because women don't fight back, scream or run away; because men cannot control themselves; because some men are psychopaths; because men who have no partners must relieve their sexual frustration; that if the man was unarmed or the woman suffered no additional physical injuries, it can't have been rape; that women lie about rape.

The simple truth that rape is sexual penetration without consent is constantly obscured in a blizzard of misogyny.

As soon as Evans and Clayton McDonald were charged, social network sites including Facebook and Twitter were alive with incessant repetition of one rape myth after another. The woman he raped was sub-

jected to abuse and vilification. She was also unlawfully named (rape survivors are granted lifetime anonymity). That naming has resulted in 17 [as at 16 May] arrests, and police questioning Sky TV officials.

Banners and graffiti proclaiming Evans' innocence appeared around his home in Wales.

In response, feminists and other progressives on Mumsnet initiated a campaign of support for the woman as part of the "We believe you" project.

"We believe you" came about after an informal survey and discussions on Mumsnet where a great many women disclosed our personal experiences of sexual violence. The benefits of mutual support quickly moved beyond empathising with personal misfortune to an analysis of gender inequality and power relations in society and the recognition of the need for a political solution.

We called on Mumsnet HQ to contact the FA to encourage it to implement its professed commitment to gender equality but have had no response so far. We established the "I Believe Her" Facebook page to counter the appalling use of Facebook by Evans' supporters; our page has around 2,000 supporters.

We used social networks to promote the petition initiated by Leo Hardt to get the



Cover photo for the "I Believe Her" Facebook page

Professional Footballers Association to drop Evans from the League One team of the year honours list. The petition (at www.change.org/professional-footballers-association-drop-ched-evans) has gathered nearly 24,000 signatures so far.

As the PFA represents professional footballers, they say they are reluctant to act against one of their members while an appeal against conviction is ongoing. They have made no attempt to postpone the award ceremony until the legal situation is concluded; consequently, they plan to honour a convicted rapist

Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the PFA, is behind the proposal for racist abuse to be a sackable offence, included in Premier and Football Leagues players' contracts from next season. Incidents involving Suarez and Terry led Taylor to state that black players might not lodge official complaints because of "such intimidation with social networks". He appears to have made no statement on sexism.

We are promoting the following model resolution:

- This notes:
1. Ched Evans of Sheffield

United and three other men were involved in the rape of a young woman.

2. Some supporters of Sheffield United and Ched Evans unlawfully named the woman and perpetuated a series of rape myths on social network sites, for which some have been arrested.

3. This further notes the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in Britain, affecting 25% of women resulting in only a 6% conviction rate.

4. This further notes TUC policy on violence against women.

5. This further notes that the PFA is affiliated to the TUC.

This calls on the TUC:

1. To require affiliates to use appropriate disciplinary procedures against members acting in contravention of TUC policy on violence against women.

2. To produce educational materials on the law relating to sexual violence and consent, in collaboration with Rape Crisis guidelines; to be distributed to fans through publication in match programmes, adverts shown at grounds, televised matches and the national press.

3. These actions to start immediately.

The Feminist Fightback campaign is conducting research into Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). For details, email feministfightback@gmail.com

French right defends bosses' freedom to sexually harass

By Anais Cintas, member of Union Pour le Communisme and CGT activist

We have heard shocking words from the UMP [Sarkozy's right-wing party which ruled until the last French election], such as "scum" ["racaille"] or "cancers" when talking about young people from poor areas or the unemployed.

We also have seen the right pin the bill for the economic crisis on the workers — for example, with the pensions reform.

This open aggression, this class hatred, at least had the merit of being a straightforward attack to which we could react. But the establishment has also passed a whole number of reforms in great secrecy, during the school holidays or even at dead of night.

The suppression of the 2002 Law Against Sexual Harassment at Work by

the constitutional council on 4 May was part of this sort of tricky, dishonest behaviour.

In effect, 48 hours before the Presidential elections, this law was purely and simply done away with. The worst part of the story is that this suppression had been proposed by a right-wing deputy and deputy mayor, Gérard Ducray, who had been convicted on appeal and given a three month suspended sentence and a 5,000 euro fine for having harassed three employees at his city hall.

The legal void created by this situation risks provoking hundreds of suppressions of juridical procedures.

Today Ducray, who had pleaded that he was only guilty of "inept seduction", was cleared of all suspicion, while his victim must start legal proceedings all over again in order to prove herself!

The hypocrisy of the constitutional council is clear: feminist groups had

rightly demanded the modification of this law, but not its repeal, because it was "imprecise".

Today the new government will propose a reformulation of the law which will probably base itself on article 2D of the EU directive on the equality of men and women. This defines sexual harassment as "a situation in which undesired behaviour of a sexual nature, whether physical, verbal or non-verbal, takes place with the aim of damaging a person's dignity and in particular creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment".

We will not applaud the new government all of a sudden. This is nothing exceptional, it is just normal. Yes, that bosses who behave like that should be punished is normal.

What's not normal is that patriarchal domination of this kind persists in our society.

RadFem and transphobia

By Esther Townsend

RadFem 2012 (14-15 July) is billed as the place to explore "the realities of women's lives".

There's plenty I could say about how and why I disagree with RadFem 2012's politics — it's anti-porn, anti-men, anti-sex worker, and more. But something else stands out, and is making many feminists (justifiably) angry.

The conference slogan is "women together for liberation", but on closer inspection what they mean is "women born women living as women" (an amendment from earlier "biological women").

"This isn't transphobia!" cry RadFem 2012 organisers — it's not about excluding some people but "assert[ing] our right as women to organise a women only space".

Women's Fightback agree this is an important right: autonomous organisation for oppressed groups can be key to raising demands, tackling prejudice, building confidence and making the whole movement more accessible. Some of our spaces are open to everyone (our "Is this as good as it gets?" conference last autumn; this paper; our blog) but some are women-only (our monthly London discussion group).

There's one big difference, however: we allow people the freedom to define their own gender!

RadFem 2012 define gender through biological essentialism. What's between our legs when we're born defines us for the rest of our lives. And there I was thinking feminism was about challenging strictly defined gender roles and assumptions based on our bodies.

Key RadFem speaker Sheila Jeffreys is an advocate of "lesbian feminism" (lesbianism as a choice to resist men's control over our sexuality) and separatism. She also argues that trans people reproduce oppressive gender roles by mutilating their bodies and taking dangerous drugs.

Is this charge of reinforcing gender stereotypes fair to trans people? In a way, it is true. Many feel gender as a continuum and don't place themselves in one of two strictly defined places (some people even move around that continuum). But, more important, don't we *all* reinforce gender roles in one way or another?

I'm female; I think of

myself as a woman; I like dresses, high heels and make-up — am I guilty?

Why are trans women (or men) more responsible than others?

Like all women, trans women experience discrimination and inequality as women. They also face higher rates of violence; difficulty accessing appropriate healthcare; loss of family support; limited employment opportunities; greater challenges in personal relationships; and often, as a result, higher rates of substance misuse and self-harm. 34% of adult trans people in the UK have attempted suicide.

The basic question is: do we think that the way gender functions in this society to create expectations, stereotypes and pressure is bad? Yes.

Would we like to live in a different society where people felt free to define themselves by their interests, abilities, actions and personalities (or perhaps not at all)? Yes.

Do we think we can get there by making people feel guilty and denying individuals already experiencing immense social pressures, the right to their own identity? No!

Some radical feminists are shifting on this issue: this year the London Feminist Network-organised Reclaim the Night march allowed trans women. This is a welcome move.

RadFem's stance has got many feminists fired up, with Facebook groups springing up, such as Feminists and Allies Against Transphobia, and people coming together on a mailing list to discuss action. Some are calling for a boycott of the event or having an alternative teach-in or protest outside the venue.

The organisers expect a big turnout. RadFem 2012 might attract a layer of women, new to feminism, who aren't so aware of these debates.

We should be prepared to engage with and relate to these women to show them that there's nothing feminist about transphobia, or any other kind of prejudice.

● To join discussions on this issue email women@workersliberty.org for contacts.

Update: Conway Hall have cancelled RadFem's booking at the venue, saying "we are not satisfied it conforms with the Equality Act (2010), or reflects our ethos regarding issues of discrimination".

Feminism vs. religion

By Hannah Thompson

This year in Britain we've seen Christian fundamentalism asserting itself.

In London, Brighton and Manchester we have seen pro-life pickets outside abortion clinics, where women are harassed and told lies about the effects of abortion. Fortunately those pickets have not gone unchallenged by pro-choice campaigners.

But increasingly, on our streets and university campuses, pro-life organisations hold stalls and workshops distributing anti-abortion propaganda.

Now Catholic ("pro-life") charity Care Confidential is seeking to bring all its affiliated centres up to "commissioning status" standard; under the Health and Social Care Bill they will provide NHS services paid for with public money.

In parliament, a section of the Conservative Party, most famously Nadine Dorries MP, has put forward bills promising to make abortion provision more "impartial" by allowing religiously-motivated charities to provide abortion counselling. In August a cross-party coalition considered allowing anti-abortion groups to run publically-funded abortion services; it has also attempted to push a bill making "abstinence" lessons compulsory in secondary schools.

The threat against women's bodily integrity is real, even if a court case is won against harassment outside clinics.

The Conservative "big society" ideal, even for those Tories who are pro-choice, leaves room for religious groups, who have gained charity status by clearing explicit references to religion out of their literature, to receive public funding "in competition" with Marie Stopes and other medically-vetted clinics.

Taking the religion out of the literature is particularly problematic, as it diverts public attention away from the ideological motivation behind pro-life groups' activity; it means pro-life groups assert their arguments by telling lies to women, frightening or guilt-tripping them out of seeking a termination, and yet can call themselves "impartial".

FIGHTING BACK

We can battle the picketers, and have done so successfully, but that won't solve the underlying problem.

Feminists should be working against the implementation of legislation that allows pro-choice groups anywhere near reproductive rights. We need to fight to keep abortion provision publicly funded, and this is part of the wider battle against NHS privatisation, academy schools and austerity.

We should also host debates and hold demonstrations to expose the arguments that pro-life groups are using: shock-tactics and lies.

The "Helpers of God's Precious Infants", who regularly picket the Marie Stopes Clinic in Woodford [and were challenged by Feminist Fightback and others in a counter-protest in April], hand out flyers which claim that abortion will "damage your maternal instinct and... bonding process with any other children you have" and can lead to "alcohol, drug abuse and eating disorders".

Groups such as SPUC and Abort67 are very vocal minority groups who have adapted tactics similar to those used in the USA including: isolating abortion providers and under-

mining their credibility, putting obstacles in the way of access to abortion, and presenting their views as impartial.

This ability for groups to call their tactics "impartial" is most concerning for feminists; government regulations only require a superficial change in an organisation's presentation of ideas — which is in their best interests — to allow them access to public money.

However, public money is not the only source of funding available to pro-lifers. Abort67, for example, which compares abortion to the slave trade and the Holocaust, receives money from a variety of churches and individuals who "outsource" their anti-abortion campaigning. It received money from the Jubilee Community Church (an evangelical congregation in Worthing) to hold pickets outside clinics in Brighton. This is not secularism, this is religious and political ideology disguised as secularism.

Abort67, for example, has this article title on its website: "White racists in 60s America and the Civil Rights movement; Pro-slavery MPs in the 18th-19th Centuries and the Trade in humans; Socialists, humanists, Green Party members, and anarchists in the 21st century and abortion."

The Jubilee church argued in an open letter to the Abortion Rights campaign:

"It seems to us that there are a lot of people looking to care for the vulnerable ladies who are pregnant... However, there is no-one who is championing the cause of the unborn child. They are the most vulnerable people in our society, wholly dependent on those outside the womb, with no voice of their own to argue their case."

SECULARISM

Religion is the only arena under capitalism where bigotry and prejudice can be championed in mainstream public media (such as BBC Radio 4) and is still considered respectable.

This is the point at which secular and "liberal" politics fall short. A complete conflict of interest such as we've seen on the "pro-gay"/"ex-gay" London bus adverts ending in the censorship of the religious poster, was justified by Boris Johnson in the *Evening Standard* with the phrase "we will not tolerate intolerance".

Without a clear-cut ethical basis upon which to build a society, the liberal concept of "equality" and the series of abstract "rights" on which it depends will come into conflict. The society socialist feminists want to build should not just be secular, it should operate on the basis of atheism; that all religious beliefs are not founded on reality. However, in order for this to be realised, we have to change people's minds about the current reality of life under capitalism.

Secularism is an important starting point for working towards this basis. Secularism is a definition of the shared political life of society, governed in a way that does not privilege or disadvantage people on the basis of their religion or belief.

Religious people would have the freedom to worship, believe and dissent as they wish. This freedom does not exist in non-secular states.

Free debate, criticism and education about and between different faiths and atheism are important to maintain a situation of free expression of ideas. Pro-life groups should be encouraged, and in some cases required, to have the religious debates about where their opposition to abortion really comes from.

In order to achieve real secularism not enforced by an authoritarian state, we need to have a dominant political dialogue that strives for social cohesion based on society as a whole, not separatism. "Christian community" should not be a way to classify people. The British Humanist Association describes the best way to define people as "equal citizens of a single community".

As socialists, we strive to raise the class consciousness of the working class in order to overthrow capitalism, but not to divide that class on the basis of religion. Children should be able to think independently from their families. A child's identity should not be defined by their parent's religion any more than it should be defined by their parent's politics.

As Richard Dawkins has asserted, we should not operate on the basis that human morality comes only from the basis of sacred religious texts and belief systems.

As atheists, we should consider religious sentiments, progressive or fundamentalist, as motivated by already existing political and moral belief systems — including patriarchy.

CHRISTIAN ARGUMENT

The Christian doctrine behind pro-life is this: God creates all life, and imbues all life with immortal souls.

In the Protestant Church, the opposition to abortion originates from Psalms 139:

Thou hast beset me behind and before,
and laid thine hand upon me.
For thou hast possessed my reins:
thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.
14

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works;
and that my soul knoweth right well.
15

My substance was not hid from thee
when I was made in secret,
and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
16

Ironically, God is also responsible for the burden of childbirth: in the Book of Genesis God punishes Eve for eating from the Tree of Knowledge:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children: and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

The Catholic Church extends the sanctity of life towards God's "seed" as well as his unborn "children"; at the extreme end of this practice sex is tightly controlled to ensure the potential for life is realised and God's gifts are not wasted.

Human beings cannot create life or souls, and to take control of the reproductive process is to usurp God's gifts or "waste" them. Sex experienced for pleasure in and of itself is wasteful; it can only be practised for the higher purpose of bringing new human souls under God's subjection.

Why is religion patriarchal? Because it carries with it the patriarchy of ancient societies, their attitudes and values long-preceding contraception, capitalism or modern day "science" as we understand it. Dawkins reiterates: "I believe it because I believe it because I believe it".

The moral guidelines of religion are not drawn from evidence and experience but from texts written, re-written, translated and interpreted over thousands of years.

Ancient dogma and tradition have meaning and history, but they carry with them attitudes and principles that by definition must operate outside the values and ideas of modern society — they must resist change, or they cease to be faith-based.

Pro-life groups continue to protect "God's gifts" as they have done for centuries, only in the modern day this means encouraging mistrust in science, and using modern concepts of pain and suffering to threaten transgressors.

Only an atheistic criticism of religion can effectively counter these ideas.

- More on Care Confidential and NHS commissioning www.feministfightback.org.uk/?p=905

- This is the text of a lead-off at one of the regular Women's Fightback London meetings. For more details email wfightback@workersliberty.org.

We have a blog!

Women's Fightback are proud to announce our new blog: <http://womensfightback.wordpress.com/>

Read: why we're socialist feminists, workers' fightback, student fightback, women's struggles in history, poetry and prose, and reviews. We welcome contributions: visit the blog and sign up!

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A weekend of socialist discussion and debate hosted by

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Friday 29 June-Sunday 1 July

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Women's Fightback

Women's Fightback is a bimonthly socialist women's paper produced by members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

We believe women's oppression is rooted in class society, and can only be ended by overthrowing capitalism. At the same time, we do not tell women — or any oppressed group



— to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our job as reorienting the labour movement towards a fight for women's rights, and the women's movement towards class struggle.

Without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women's oppression. Without a mass movement of organised, mobilised women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution. Neither is possible without the other.

Workers' Liberty women are active in the fight to transform the labour movement, and in many different campaigns — from reproductive freedom to migrant rights to the struggle against cuts. If you're a socialist feminist, please consider joining us — and, in the meantime, write for and distribute Women's Fightback to help win the biggest possible audience for socialist feminist ideas.

● **Contact: wfightback@workersliberty.org**