



## SISTERS UNCUT CAMPAIGN

# Stop cuts in domestic violence services!

By Becky Crocker

Women activists have set up a direct action group, **Sisters Uncut**, to protest against cuts to domestic violence services. **Sisters Uncut** held its first direct action on **Saturday 14 February**, to mark the spike in domestic violence that is usually recorded around **Valentine's Day**.

Cuts to domestic violence services have reached a critical point. According to a recent Women's Aid report:

- Between 2010 and 2014 (July) the number of specialist refuge services decreased from 187 to 155.
- In England, according to Council of Europe recommendations, there is a shortfall of 1,727 refuge bedspaces (32%).
- In one day in 2013, 155 women and their 103 children were turned away from a refuge because they could not be accommodated.
- 48% of 167 domestic violence services

### Women's Oppression, Feminism and the left

Reading pack, including suggested questions for discussion groups.

Topics include: **Second Wave, Liberal and Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism,**

**Anarchafeminism, Sex Work, labour movement experiences.**

• £4 including postage from **AWL, 20e Tower Workshops, Riley Road, London, SE1 3DG.**



in England said that they were running services without funding. Six refuge services were being run without dedicated funding and using up their reserves to keep their services going.

In addition, a Citizens Advice Bureau report released in February 2015 confirmed that survivors of domestic violence are being denied justice as a result of the government's 2012 reforms to legal aid. The new law requires survivors to provide "evidence" of domestic abuse, which is hard to obtain if it is in the house of the abusive former partner. Survivors are also denied legal aid because the income and assets of the former partner are taken into consideration. Unable to pay legal fees, many women are representing themselves in court and facing cross-examination from an abusive partner, or "giving up on their rights to justice", as the report says.

Services are under threat as local councils pass on funding cuts from central government. In addition, local councils are increasingly contracting out domestic violence services to third sector and for-profit organisations who will not pay to deliver specialist support. Women's Aid reports that between April and July 2014, ten specialist domestic violence services across England lost funding for services they were providing, in all but one case to a non-specialist service provider.

At the same time, domestic violence is on the rise. It used to be the case that one in four women would experience domestic violence at some point in their lives; that statistic has recently risen to one in three.

Sisters Uncut is opposed to all forms of austerity. It specifically aims to highlight the much-overlooked impact of austerity on domestic violence services. Sisters Uncut demands:

- No more cuts to domestic violence services
- Restore funding that has been cut
- Secure funding for specialist domestic violence services; this should be ring-fenced at a national level.
- Local Authorities to fully meet the demands of their communities, recognising that different women have different needs.
- Guaranteed access to legal aid for women experiencing domestic violence.
- Provide access to safe and secure social



On 14 February, around 200 women protested in central London against government cuts to services provided to women fleeing domestic violence. The group marched to Piccadilly Circus, where the names of women who had died at the hands of domestic abuse were read out and flowers laid on the ground in their honour. People then blocked the traffic of a busy junction for 30 minutes, where protesters continued chanting and handing out leaflets to members of the public.

housing for women who otherwise cannot afford to flee.

- Panic rooms should not be classified as a spare room under the Bedroom Tax.
- Safety should not be subject to immigration status; extend access to safe housing to women with no recourse to public funds.

Sisters Uncut is a specifically feminist campaign group. One of the activists who has been involved from the start said, "A group of us set up Sisters Uncut because we were feeling rageful about the effect of austerity on women. A lot of us work in domestic violence services and we can see

the devastating impact that the cuts are having. It has to stop! We wanted to organise with women and create a safe and open space where women feel empowered to take action."

**Sisters Uncut is committed to an intersectional approach, meaning that there is an understanding that women's experiences of violence are affected by race, class, disability, sexuality and immigration status. Sisters Uncut's weekly London-based meetings are open to all self-defining women.**

- For more info: [www.facebook.com/sistersuncut](http://www.facebook.com/sistersuncut)

# Free speech is a feminist issue

By Pragna Patel\*

**Southall Black Sisters have always organised autonomously as an anti-communist, anti-racist, and progressive organisation. We've been going since 1979, as both a service provider to black and minority women, and an anti-racist and feminist organisation.**

When we were set up, there was silence on race and gender in a range of social movements. We wanted to organise within those movements, autonomously, and at the same time calling on these movements to adopt what is now fashionably termed an "intersectional" approach to seeing the interconnections between race, class, sex, gender, and to build progressive alliances and coalitions.

In those early days, we took our secular identity for granted. It was just present in our politics, our outlooks, our thinking. The term "black" was certainly contested. But at the height of black feminist and anti-racist struggles in the 80s, the secular black identity was a progressive one, and a unifying one; it allowed us to forge connections and solidarity which transcended boundaries of class, ethnicity, caste and religion within black and minority communities. And with other communities as well: we were involved with delegations to Northern Ireland, to mining communities and so on.

So we've always maintained that the identity you choose, and coalition-building are interconnected, because the identity you choose conditions the alliances you can build.

By secularism, I do not mean anti-religion, but a separation of religion from the state. Secularism means that the rule of law, and other essential political, legal and civil society institutions and their functions, should not be informed by religion. Secularism on its own does not guarantee equality or democracy; we have seen plenty of totalitarian regimes which are secular and are hardly democratic. But secularism is an important precondition.

That is why the demand for a secular state must be tied to the demand for a democracy which is actually meaningful in that it enhances rather than hinders access to fundamental freedoms in private and public spaces.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

**What makes the ground beneath us so shaky now? New forms of religious identities have become the counter-hegemonic framework of resistance to racism, and neoliberalism and imperialism; that makes coalition building so much more difficult.**

In the context of the war on terror, many on the left, but by no means all, have accepted the use of religion as the key definer of political identity within minority communities. Many social movements have actually embraced and given space to religion and religiosity in their movements without questioning what this brings with it. And this is as true of feminism as of other social mobilisations.

What we are left with is a growing acceptance of religious identity politics, and with it an increasing gap between movements for social justice and the movement for gender equality. Because as someone in the movement for gender equality, which is also a movement for social justice, I often find myself challenging religious identity politics.

SBS was one of the first organisations in the UK to respond to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism worldwide, by which we mean the use of religion for political purposes. We set up Women Against Fundamentalism in 1989. It was born in the midst of the tremendous furor against Salman Rushdie and the publication of *Satanic Verses*. The high point of that furor was the fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini, which declared him a blasphemer against Islam and called for his death.

Very quickly, the media reduced the whole Rushdie affair to a debate between supporters of Rushdie, seen to be people from the artistic community, intellectuals, artists, who were supporting freedom of speech; and Muslim religious leaders, many of whom were calling for the book to be banned and supporting the fatwa on the grounds that Rushdie had of-

fended religious sensibilities, even though many had not read the book. It was a polarised debate. And it's not surprising that the media characterised this debate in this way, because the left was silent on this question.

It was left to WAF and SBS to pick apart this binary, and assert the need to challenge racism and religious fundamentalism at the same time. "Racism cannot be an excuse not to confront religious fundamentalism" was our mantra.

Our mantra is an important one, because in fact racism, imperialism and fundamentalism are in each other's environment, absolutely linked.

## FREE SPEECH

**Today I feel bookended by two linked events: the Rushdie affair, 1989, and Charlie Hebdo, January 2015. What the two have in common is the struggle for free speech and the right to dissent.**

I don't think that we can take any pleasure in having predicted in 1989 the rise of fundamentalism and the religious far right globally. I don't think any of us could have imagined the extent of the rise of religious political movements, or the violence and atrocities which have followed globally. We speak in the shadow of a litany of unspeakable horrors which have now taken place.

We have seen the recent massacre of what were, contrary to popular view, radical-left-leaning journalists in Paris, many of whom were trade unionists or members of the Communist Party — they were part of the left. We have seen the no less shocking acts of religious extremist violence, murder and even genocide in Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Somalia, Kenya, and elsewhere. And who is that violence perpetrated against? The majority are civilians, who are often from the same religious background as the perpetrators.

Whilst we have been at pains to point out that free speech has limits, especially when it incites hatred and violence, the demand for the extension of the blasphemy laws, which began after Rushdie, laws that had traditionally privileged Christianity, was not one such limit to free speech. We said the laws shouldn't be extended, and we called for the disestablishment of the Church. We also made the point that free speech is not just a liberal, but a feminist and a left issue.

I think that the right to dissent from religious and patriarchal orthodoxies has always been an important part of the armoury of feminism. Our analysis showed that the real losers from a religious culture and from this fallacious idea of the right to not be offended are women, sexual minorities and other religious minorities, more often than not from the same communities. What has happened from Rushdie to now in the UK bears this out. Those who were targeted, vilified, intimidated and assaulted are those who dared to show irreverence towards religion, to criticise religion, however mildly.

The *Behzti* play in 2005, which tried to depict rape in a Sikh temple, was seen by Sikh fundamentalists to offend Sikh sensibilities, and the play was pulled from the Birmingham Repertory. Then in 2006 the Indian painter, known as the Picasso of India, M F Hussein, put on an exhibition in London, and that was pulled following protests by Hindu fundamentalists, who said that his depictions of naked female deities offended Hindu sensibilities.

You see vigilante groups of young Muslim men, linked to fundamentalist groups in Tower Hamlets, who have become self-appointed guardians of community morality in that part of London. They police women and their dress codes, and police sexuality.

Hindu, Sikh, Muslim fundamentalists are campaigning and protesting aggressively; and although everyone has the right to protest, they sometimes blur the line between protests and intimidation, and terrorise and censor democratic debate.

Religious fundamentalism and the religious right are all to do with power and politics. The use of violence to suppress alternative ideas and any form of dissent from religious orthodoxies glorifies criminality and dresses it up as a fight for a just cause, even sometimes defence of human rights. It uses violence to destroy free, open democratic societies created out of struggles for accountability.

The end game of all religious fundamentalism is hatred and intolerance, silence and violence. It leads to the destruction of aspirations and hopes and efforts to be better human beings. It aims to destroy our capacity to imagine what justice

and equality might look like: ideas that should be, in the words of Indian historian Dilip Simeon, the very music of humanity.

It was argued by many people on the broad left that Rushdie was provocative and caused religious offence, led to the stereotyping of Muslim communities as backward and medieval and so on. These same people are today arguing that *Charlie Hebdo* caused religious offence, played into stereotyping of Muslims, and has fed into racist and intolerant French establishment culture which treats many Muslims as an underclass, subjected to lifelong poverty, deprivation and alienation. They also argue that what occurred was not satire because it involved the powerful attacking the powerless.

I'm not denying that the ghettos, deprivation, racism, humiliation, alienation suffered by migrants, Muslims and non-Muslims, in France or anywhere else in Europe. This deserves political analysis and resistance, and actually there has been a rich history of both. We in SBS see how racism plays out in the daily lives of the most vulnerable. But we urgently need to grasp and accept the fact that the story of *Charlie Hebdo* does not start with the racist context alone, or the racist aftermath and backlash of the killings — it starts with the killings themselves.

They are the product of a religious far-right ideology which is nihilistic and no different from fascism. It is not possible to justify, without loss of integrity, the idea that such killings are the consequences of the dispossessed and the disenfranchised. You should try telling that to the parents of the children who were killed in the massacre in Pakistan at the end of last year; or to the parents of the children abducted and killed in Nigeria. Are these people not themselves part of the dispossessed and the disenfranchised in their own countries?

I think this idea that many on the left endlessly peddle, that *Charlie Hebdo* is racist and Islamophobic and that the terrorists were merely victims of the war on terror, serves to erase, deny, minimise or underestimate the threat that is posed by all religious fundamentalist movements, both global and context-specific.

When the left argues that there is a new construction of anti-racist resistance, based around religion and the politics of the right not to be offended, this poisons progressive activism, and allows the state to tiptoe around religion and accommodate demands such as the accommodation of sharia principles into family law. The state has accommodated religion to such an extent that we are seeing religion encroach into the way that the law and education operate.

## GENDER SEGREGATION

**At the end of 2012 Universities UK actually put out guidance legitimising gender segregation at public events if external speakers demanded it, on the basis that speakers had the right to manifest their religion.**

The guidance did not question the issue of sex discrimination. In fact it legitimated gender apartheid. It took a campaign and threats of legal action before UUK agreed to withdraw that guidance. We argued that the UUK had violated equality and non-discrimination principles enshrined in the public sector equality duty and Human Rights Act and that these laws which had long been using as a tool to challenge sexism were themselves the products of long hard battles by feminists, racial minorities, and others and in fact, are a part the postwar settlement.

But there were many people on the left, including feminists like Laurie Penny, who argued that we were being racist. I remember that she and others reduced our protest to mere hyperbole, or Islamophobia, and said that it was yet another attack on Muslim people.

And then in 2013 we had the Law Society issuing guidance on how lawyers can prepare sharia-compliant wills. It was drafted using reference to fundamentalist texts which defend the most abhorrent practices including death by stoning. It endorsed so-called sharia succession rules, which stipulate that as a general rule, a male is worth twice a woman, so she receives only half of what a man would, and that illegitimate children have no right to inherit.

So the guidance accepts without question the inherent discrimination that exists within Islam, and indeed within other religions, against women, and against children born out of wedlock. And of course the Law Society doesn't ask how it

\* Pragna Patel is director of Southall Black Sisters. She was speaking at a Workers' Liberty London public meeting on Boko Haram and Charlie Hebdo on Thursday 12 February.



**Women Against Fundamentalism was set up in 1989 to provide an anti-racist opposition to the backlash against Salman Rushdie and *Satanic Verses***

possibly knows what is and isn't sharia law — there is no such thing! There are personal Muslim codes that operate throughout the Muslim world, but they are varied and vigorously contested and targeted for reform or repeal, particularly by feminists, sexual minorities and others.

The real problem is that the Law Society, instead of upholding a rights-based culture, upholds a sharia-compliant culture, promotes it, and weighs into doctrinal territory. This came after a series of training courses that they developed on sharia-compliance in the realm of family, children, property and financial settlements.

All of this gives succour to Islamists, and to religious fundamentalists in other communities, to argue for parallel legal systems. The argument is that secular human rights law can apply to the majority, but minorities must settle for second best, second-rate, religious, patriarchal codes of conduct. What we see is form of racism. What the Law Society is doing is preventing a culture of human rights taking root in minority communities and seeing to it that they are sort of "left to their own devices".

The struggle for a secular universal human rights framework is made much more difficult when you have a government that goes on and on about upholding so-called "British values". No-one knows quite what that means, but I suppose it ought to mean respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. But just as they encourage everyone to respect "British" human rights values, they threaten to repeal the Human Rights Act! There is a mix of interests at play here, sometimes converging, sometimes diverging. But what we are seeing is a growing alignment of religion and the law, and state support for non-state religious arbitration systems.

We are really seeing the rise of far-right religious and political movements across Europe and everywhere else, and they mirror each other. While they appear to oppose each other, they can and do converge and overlap. Where they overlap is to maintain authenticity, purity of identity, culture and tradition. That is as true of the EDL and the BNP as it is of the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh fundamentalists as well.

Their common desire is to protect extremist ideology and to suppress or eliminate ideas that seek to promote non-violence, empathy, compassion and the value of human life for everyone.

There is another debate raging at the moment, especially among South Asian women, about whether to seek an amendment to the Serious Crimes Bill that wants to criminalise sex-selection abortion.

That is the practice of aborting a foetus for no reason other than that it is female. It is a practice which is a part of the spectrum of gender-based violence against women in India and the Indian subcontinent. It is has reached crisis propor-

tions there, because together with female foeticide, female infanticide and other forms of violence, in India 15 million women are missing. These practices are skewing sex ratios in certain parts of the country, and that in turn means that families and others are trafficking women from poorer parts of Asia and from poorer parts of the country – in Punjab, Haryana and elsewhere.

### CONFLATION

**However there is only anecdotal evidence that it has taken place among South Asian communities here, and the case studies produced by the pro-amendment lobby are actually conflating coercion into sex-selection abortion with domestic violence against women who have given birth to girls.**

The statistical evidence and political impetus for legislation to criminalise sex-selection abortion come from Migration Watch. One surely suspects what their agenda is. But despite the lack of evidence, some women's groups are vociferously demanding criminalisation of sex-selection abortion in the UK.

They are publicly claiming that they seeking to clarify abortion laws. That leads one to question why they should wish to embed it in a criminal Bill, and why they can't produce guidance. But the biggest problem is that the whole thing is driven by the Christian right. Fiona Bruce MP, who is a part of the evangelical Christian right, is being supported by the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim right. They are all behind this amendment.

Such alliances are not new. They are common on the international stage, regarding human rights law. But here we have the anti-immigration right and the religious right coming together. It is an attempt to curtail women's reproductive rights in an instrumentalised manner. They are using the language of choice in order to destroy the right of choice.

The stories we should start with are those of the courage and the bravery of countless civilians around the world who through a growing sense of injustice challenge and reject religious fundamentalism and refuse to underestimate it. They are the direct targets of criminality and genocide and they are the dispossessed and the alienated.

**We have to assert secular values, but more importantly, we have to safeguard secular democratic spaces and values; and that we must do so without abdicating moral responsibility and solidarity with all those who dare to speak out against religious fundamentalism and other forms of oppression.**

# A feminist perspective on free education

**By Kelly Rogers, Defend Education Birmingham, National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, personal capacity**

**On International Women's Day women in NCAFC have called a mass occupation to force a discussion around a feminist perspective on free education politics.**

This discussions needs to include a critique of the neoliberal university from a feminist perspective, and a critique on our own movement: sexist practices on the left, and the failures of feminist groups and organisations like the NUS Women's Campaign, whose distorted application of safer spaces politics is leading us squarely towards inaction.

Let's take a closer look at the demands that have formed the centrepiece of our occupations, demonstrations, and campaigns over recent years:

- Education should be free with living grants for all
- The reintroduction, and improvement, of EMA
- Halls accommodation should be provided as an in-house service, not for profit, and should be provided in house.

These demands relate to the economic well-being of students during their studies and after. While it goes without saying that if implemented they would benefit both women and men, and that economic inequality is a problem that we should be fighting against for the benefit of all, to declare these demands genderless is to obscure the very real reality of poverty felt by women, because they are women.

The gender pay gap is still a critical problem. In 2012, comparing all work, women earned 18.6 per cent less per hour than men. "Women's work" [1] tends to be devalued and low paid: almost two-thirds of those earning £7 per hour or less are women. Women also tend to take on part-time roles, partly due to the disproportionate burden of caring responsibilities.

These roles offer lower pay, fewer opportunities for promotion, and typically comprise more precarious contracts. Discrimination still rests at the heart of the labour market, especially for women of child-bearing age (a category into which the majority of graduates fall) [2]. All this means that when women leave education they are faced with a hugely inhospitable job market.

Women are faced with a set of obstacles that make is far more likely they will end up living in poverty [3]. The labour market is even more inhospitable to women of colour, disabled women, lesbian, bisexual, queer and trans\* women whose intersecting oppressions mean they face discrimination from many corners.

The threat of a lifetime of debt hangs most heavily over women, and the benefits promised to graduates, in the form of economic freedom and social mobility, fall largely into the laps of men.

Living costs while in education are also a gendered issue. Women take on the brunt of caring roles – to children and/or elderly or disabled relatives. During the 2010/11 academic year, 1,500 (5.5 per cent of total student population) declared themselves as having caring responsibilities, with the majority having dependent children. The majority of these, as in wider society, are women.

These responsibilities necessarily carry with them financial burdens which will only be made worse by the expensive costs of education and living imposed by our institutions, which rake in vast profits and enjoy multi-million pound yearly surpluses. The NUS found that the second largest barrier to lone parents entering higher education was financial problems relating to childcare costs and fees. 92 per cent of lone parents are women.

Any demands relating to living costs, then, are intertwined with these aspects of the real lives of women; raising the number and generosity of bursaries and living grants could really offset the financial problems facing students, and dissuading women from entering higher education [4]

Continued over

# A feminist perspective on free education

## From centre pages

- **Just pay and conditions for staff: 5:1 pay ratio between the highest and lowest paid staff and an end to casual, precarious contracts.**
- **No outsourcing of services**
- **A Living Wage for all workers**
- **Closure of the gender pay gap**

Once again women would disproportionately benefit from the implementation of these demands, compared to men. Our Higher and Further Education institutions suffer abysmal gender pay gaps, relating not only to discriminatory pay but to the roles that women and men occupy. The overall HE full-time gender pay gap is 18.5 per cent and the part-time gender pay gap is 22.5 per cent, both of which are higher than average public-sector pay gaps. At 12.7 per cent the gender pay gap between full-time HE teaching professionals is higher than all other teaching professional groups. Women are far more likely to be working part-time than men in most occupations within HE institutions. Finally, women are also under-represented in senior positions; only 19 per cent of full-time professors and 14.4 per cent of university vice-chancellors are female [5].

The implementation of the Living Wage for all staff in all institutions would be going some way to making the lives of women staff better. Reducing the gap between the highest and lowest paid to 5:1 would see a vast reduction in the pay gap. If this is achieved by topping up the incomes of the lowest paid, using the savings shaved off the highest paid, we would witness a net shift of wealth vastly in favour of women [6].

In most cases women are the first to be made redundant, the first to have their hours and contracts hacked, and the most likely to be paid less than subsistence-level wages. Defending education workers is a feminist project.

- **An end to the intimidation and victimisation of students: no disciplinaries for protest, cops off campus, no co-operation with migration enforcement and ejection of their officials from campus, no co-operation with spying programmes such as Prevent.**

All activists are at risk from the growing repression from university managements and government. Last academic year saw a frightening shift in the level of repression that university managements are prepared to use against their students, and this year we only have to look to the University of Warwick, with police deploying tasers and tear gas, for this point to be demonstrated. Once again, however, liberation is central to the issues at hand.

There are numerous reported cases of harassment and degradation of women by police when in custody and of the denial of basic needs, such as the provision of sanitary products; of brutality and violence against disabled protesters — the awful treatment of those under “suicide watch” and the denial of medication, of racial profiling and violence towards black individuals both in and out of custody; the deportation of dissident migrant citizens; and trans and genderqueer individuals being misgendered, mistreated and harassed as a result of their gender identity. Freedom to protest is also a right that is most often enjoyed by the privileged, even when our freedom is being eroded and withdrawn.

- **Directly democratic education with all decisions made by, or accountable to, staff and students**
- **Education for the public good: for financial transparency and accountability, against the influence of profit in education and research, against league tables, and for ethical in-**



## vestment and procurement

Demands for democracy too have benefits specific to women and to those from marginalised groups. For equality to exist in our education institutions, it is necessary that power, as well as wealth, is distributed more equitably. Democratic structures that give students and staff meaningful oversight over decisions over restructuring of departments, for example, are crucial in a context where young women academics tend to be the first to be made redundant, or to have their contracts casualised.

Democracy often involves affirmative action that deliberately platforms and affords greater power to those belonging to liberation groups. It is necessary that democratic reforms incorporate means of engaging and platforming women, so that we can begin to address the overwhelming silencing of women taking place in universities and all workplaces day-to-day.

- **We demand equality and an end to discrimination in education.**

Across the board education activists and activist groups are failing to talk about liberation. This failure is related to a crisis across left-wing activism where support for liberation on the left continues to be nominal rather than meaningful.

The above analysis only scratches the surface, especially with regard to the intersecting identities and oppressions that women in Higher and Further education embody and experience, and yet even this limited analysis makes it clear that the demands being put forward by education activists are certainly not genderless, and have, at their heart, liberation. Learning to consider the campaigns we organise for, and the slogans we shout, from a liberation perspective is an important step in ensuring that our activism is truly liberating.

We are letting our education institutions and our government off the hook. Deep-seated discrimination and inequality between genders, races, disabled and non-disabled people, people with different sexual orientations, and British and migrant student and workers is going unchallenged.

## MAKING WOMEN SAFE

**The NUS Women's Campaign statement justifying their withdrawal of support for the 19 November Free Education demo states, "Our priority as a campaign is the welfare and safety of women and the right for women to organise and campaign in the ways that they feel the most comfortable".**

Their priority not change, but safety. NUS's u-turn was a particular blow, at a time when a very small number of hard-working students, nearly all of them women, were organising a demo that was later attended by over 10,000 students. But it reflects a trend where safer spaces politics, a set of politics which in theory and often in practice is laudable, is being misapplied and co-opted. In the context of this trend, it is worth asking the question: what does it take to make women safe?

There appears to be a prevalent idea in the student movement, at present, that we can make the entire world safe by, first, organising within safer spaces, second, rigorously (and

often undemocratically) policing those spaces, and third, legislating the rest of society into also being safe. If society, or x institution/organisation/group of people refuses to comply with safer space rules, then it is the obligation of all right-on feminists to advise other women not to participate in those spaces.

Let's consider an alternative: when we say "our priority is the welfare and safety of women", we mean it our priority to organise radical campaigns that fight for a future without debt, a future with good working conditions, and a future where education is free, and every woman can be educated for the sake of education, and the sake of the public good. A radical overhaul of the education system, from school level to university level, from which progressive ideas and generations of socially-minded activists will be born, is a necessary step to a society in which women are always safe. This sort of change isn't going to be legislated into existence, because it requires a real challenge to a powerful state-corporate nexus, and the prevailing neoliberal ideology, and it involves coming up against managements, government and police. All of these sites of resistance mean being distinctly unsafe. A significant number of women activists over the past two years have been kettled, arrested, disciplined, suspended from university — and none of these things were safe, or comfortable.

So why, as feminists, are we teaching women to avoid these fights, and to retreat to safer spaces? Safer spaces are absolutely necessary, but they should strive to be havens where women, and other oppressed groups, regroup, collectively heal, educate themselves and organise so that when they go back onto the streets they are able to make the change they need, and engage in resistance that is truly empowering, because it is effective. Ultimately, it's not about the individual, it's about the movement.

**This International Women's Day, a day that over recent years has served to typify a neoliberal, individualist "feminism", we want to move to the beat of a different drum. We want to occupy — not because it will be safe, although there are benefits in occupying as women and non-binary people, and without men — but because we want to pose a challenge to a system that continues to make all women unsafe, and open up a discussion with others inside our movement about how that is done.**

- For more information on plan and location, and what you can do contact NCAFC women via: 07891714146, 07749263622 and againstfeesandcuts@gmail.com.

## Notes

- [1] By which I mean work than women typically do — women are disproportionately employed in carework, and other social reproductive roles such as cleaning.
- [2] See Fawcett Society.
- [3] Economic independence is incredibly important for women in particular who continue to remain trapped in abusive relationships and households in their thousands, simply because they and their children have nowhere else to go.
- [4] There are many other aspects of women's lives that should be noted here, although this list is (of course) not exhaustive: lesbian, bisexual, queer or trans\* women are far more likely to be estranged from their parents, offering numerous financial pressures. Women of colour often come from lower-income backgrounds, compared to white women, meaning that parents are less able to offer financial support, and that many of them live in poverty, or would do if they chose to enter higher education. The numerous and varied disabilities that many women at university live with also often mean that those students have far higher living costs than non-disabled students, a fact only set to get worse with continued government attacks on disability benefits. Now let's imagine how these different identities might intersect and a much more complex image emerges. The lived realities of students from liberation groups involves multiple and complex oppressions and needs, that much is very clear.
- [5] See *The Gender Pay Gap — A Literature Review* by New JNCHES Equality Working Group.
- [6] The same applies, of course, to BME staff and especially to women of colour — the gap in pay, in opportunities and the division of work type is racialised and gendered both.

## WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

Women's Fightback is a bimonthly socialist women's paper produced by members and supporters of 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 goal as reorienting the labour movement towards a consistent, militant 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 women and other oppressed groups, 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, the student movement and in many different campaigns.**

**If you are a socialist feminist, please consider joining us. Or in the meantime, write for and distribute Women's Fightback to help win a wider audience for socialist feminist ideas.**

- **Contact: women@workersliberty.org.**

## WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK BLOG.

womensfightback.wordpress.com