

Women's Fightback



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Solidarity is our answer to "Big Society"



Women will be on the frontline of the fightback. Pictures are by Vicki Morris and from Barnet's march against the cuts 30 January

By Jean Lane

"It's a vulnerable time. We have been told not to speak to anyone", said a woman picketing at Rawmarsh School in Rotherham on 12 January, on strike against threats of redundancies. Women preparing to fight cuts in Tower Hamlets said the same to Women's Fightback.

But the instruction from managers not to talk about what is happening to them is likely to make women at the forefront of the cuts even more angry.

"We need to do the exact opposite", said one woman at a mass meeting of all the trade unions organising council workers in Tower Hamlets. "We need to tell parents, community activists and other local service users what is about to happen to their services because there will be a lot of anger out there when they find out their kid's youth club, childrens centre, health service, community links are threatened with destruction".

The order not to speak out is a conscious tactic to keep us isolated. It won't work. The cuts are an attack on the working-class and women are at the forefront.

And women must be at the forefront of the fightback against the government's attack, not least the ideological attack.

Cameron's so-called "Big Society" is ruling-class speak for pushing women back into the home, providing childcare, health care and looking after men.

It is an attack on our class by a government which is made up of millionaires who do not need to use public services. Their philosophy is "If you can't pay for it you can't have it".

We have a better philosophy. It is one of solidarity. We stick up for each other and we fight to protect those essential services, which make society a better place.

Working class women face a three-way attack.

We stand to lose jobs. Twice as many women as men work in the public sector and 40% of all female workers are employed by the state.

We stand to lose benefits. Women are more affected by the cuts in areas like housing benefit, cuts in up-ratings to the additional pension, public sector pen-

sions or attendance allowances.

Then there are the impact of measures such as the £640 million council tax freeze, the abolition of the child trust fund, indirect taxes such as VAT, the effect of cutting the Health in Pregnancy grant and the Sure Start maternity grant.

SERVICES

And we stand to lose the services, which enable women to take an equal part in public life.

The services which free us from the domestic drudgery which characterised our lives in the nineteenth century before the setting up of the Welfare State.

Women workers cannot and should not wait for the trade union leaderships to

get their act together to fight the cuts. The TUC have left it until 26 March to hold a demonstration. By that time most Local Authorities will have set their budgets and will have pushed through the attacks.

We need to organise now. We need to build campaigns that link women workers with women in the community. We also need to take the fight into the unions for a more aggressive defence of our jobs and services.

We must link up our fight with that of students who are fighting to ensure that working-class youth can afford to get an education rather than it being a privilege of the rich.

The Con-Dem government is proving something that many of us argued in the women's movement

back in the 70s and 80s. The gains we fought for and won at that time were very good. But, if we don't link our demands to that of fighting the class system and of changing society, the gains we won can be taken away. As long as the government rule for the rich and for profit, we will have to continually fight to hang on to those gains.

Let us make the fight against the cuts herald the birth of a working-class women's movement which will fight for a change in how our society is run: away from Cameron's rich privilege and towards a socialist society in which women's emancipation is part and parcel of the emancipation of the whole working class.

For a national network of women fighting the cuts

By Elaine Jones, Merseyside TUC (p.c.)

In Merseyside, London, Hull and elsewhere Women Against the Cuts groups have been formed in response to the Tory/Liberal cuts. Other already existing groups — such as Feminist Fightback in London (see back page) and benefit rights campaigners have also been working on how the cuts affect women.

We need to discuss how to develop a national network to help mobilise working class women in the fight to stop the Tory/Liberal cuts, to help overcome the domination of men in the anti-cuts campaigns and to fight for a better society. All socialists and anti-cuts activists should be part of that discussion.

We should discuss in our trade unions and student unions to support and help establish such groups and encourage discussion about how the cuts will affect women.

We should make sure International Women's Day events in March are orientated towards anti-cuts activity.

When working class women start to organise they transform themselves and the labour movement. It is the working class who have the industrial strength to stop the cuts but when we fight we not only have industrial strength to stop attacks on jobs and services but we begin to challenge the daily sexism that we face.

The sort of women's movement we need is one based on demands that affect working class women's lives and one that challenge the core assumptions of capitalism.

A network of women trade union activists, socialists, feminists, anti-capitalist and community activists will strengthen the battle against the cuts but will also help start a discussion about how we build a working class women's movement.

What do readers think?

**NUS Women's Officer
Vote
socialist
feminist!**

At the Women's Conference of the National Union of Students (15-17 March), Jade Baker will be standing for National Women's Officer. She explains why...

"I'm standing as an anti-cuts activist, proud supporter of the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts and a revolutionary socialist feminist.

"I want to see NUS lead the student revolt against cuts and fees, not sell it out, and the Women's Campaign should be at the forefront of this fight.

"I am sabbatical VP Education at Westminster University — with a diverse and mainly working-class student body. I'm from a working-class background and spent quite a bit of my childhood in women's refuges so when I talk about cuts to domestic violence provision, or the scrapping of EMA, or how hard it is for working-class kids to get to university, I am speaking from personal experience.

"Feminism was my 'way in' to socialism, and for me socialism and women's liberation are inseparable."

**• For more info:
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Making our voice heard in the unions

In January Janine Booth became the first ever woman to be elected to the London Transport seat on the National Council of Executives of the rail-workers union, the RMT. Becky Crocker spoke to Janine about the election and organising women in a male-dominated industry.

JB: Several women members have contacted me to say my election has given them a boost and made them feel there is a place for them in the union.

It has been dispiriting to see so few women in union leadership positions — I am the first from my region, and only the third woman to serve on the RMT executive. The union has never had any female officers. It is important that this is starting to change. People rightly say that we should elect the best candidate for the job, but it's hard to believe that this has only ever been a woman on three occasions!

BC: RMT is a male-dominated union representing a male-dominated industry. Do you think you were faced with additional challenges as a woman candidate?

JB: London Transport workers voted for the person they saw as best representing their interests, regardless of gender. They liked what I said about providing a stronger voice for the rank-and-file and building a more effective, democratic union.

A very small number of activists campaigned against me using my part-time status as an argument, but others took a firm stand against that. It is a positive sign that the big majority of members didn't let sexism poison their voting choices.

But there are obstacles to women's involvement in the union, way before you'd even consider standing for the Executive.

Juggling shiftwork, caring responsibilities and union activity can be impossible! If you go to a branch meeting and find that you are the only woman there, it can be very off-putting. But, we have lots of strong women members and activists in the region, and probably more women reps than ever.

BC: How well do you feel the RMT currently campaigns on women's issues, and how do you hope your election will change things?

JB: There is definitely room for improvement. Women face specific issues at work — from sexual harassment to toilet provi-



Janine Booth

sion, and the woeful lack of childcare provision and "family-friendly" policies. Women are concentrated in some of the most exploited and low-paid jobs in our industry, for example in contracted-out cleaning and catering services.

The union needs to step up organising in these grades and on these issues. We have a "Women's Charter", but it needs to become a real tool for fighting for improvements for women at work.

We could also be more active on broader women's issues from abortion rights to international solidarity. I plan to make sure that when women raise issues through the union's Women's Advisory Committee, more is done to create vibrant, relevant campaigns.

BC: How are the cuts affecting women in the transport industry?

JB: Although more women have joined the industry over recent decades, we now face that being thrown into reverse by job cuts in grades most popular with women — admin, ticket-selling, stations. Moreover, women workers face losing the services we rely on outside work like nurseries or carers' support services.

To help push through cuts without resistance, the government is planning to attack our employment and union rights, scant though they already are.

BC: How do you see the unions shaping up to fight the cuts?

JB: RMT is more willing to fight than some other unions. We need the whole trade union movement to take up the battle against cuts, to be militant against the government and the employers. Unions need to fight the battles in their own industries, but also unite with each other and working-class community groups. This means involving women workers as well as men; migrant workers and the unemployed.

It is also important that rank-and-file workers organise to ensure that their unions act effectively and that within that, women workers make sure that our voice is heard.

Give sexism the red card!

By Fran Chapman

The recent sacking of sexist Sky Sports presenter, Andy Gray, is a step forward for feminism. But, it's not without limitations.

Gray was dismissed from his seven-figure salary job after he and fellow presenter Richard Keys agreed, off-air before a Premier League Match, that assistant referee Sian Massey and women generally "probably don't know the offside rule".

Gray initially only received disciplinary action for his sexism. Had Gray's comments been a racist slur, the furore could have been so great Gray would have been sent packing immediately. When Jade Goody called Indian actress Shilpa Shetty "Shilpa Poppadom" on *Celebrity Big Brother*, the backlash was so great that Goody went into hiding, following death threats.

In Gray's case, it wasn't until further evidence of sexism became clear that Sky terminated his contract. Another presenter Andy Burton was recorded de-

scribing Massey as "a bit of a looker", with Gray replying "no, I wouldn't. I definitely wouldn't".

These events have ignited public debate, complete with vile posturing from the right-wing. It seems that many are genuinely undecided whether this is sexism or "banter".

A question put to the panelists on BBC Question Time encapsulates this: "Should've Andy Gray been sacked, or, has Britain lost its sense of humour?"

Panel member and past *Apprentice* contestant Katie Hopkins answered the question crudely, claiming "women do not want equal treatment, and couldn't handle it if they tried".

Women are one of the most vibrant elements of the current student movement with many more on demonstrations and taking part in direct action than past struggles. Women are involved in anti-cuts groups across the country and many are raising awareness that the cuts will further impede women's liberation.

Has Hopkins ever heard of Sylvia Pankhurst, Grunwick or Women Against Pit



Having a laugh? Not anymore. Andy Gray and Richard Keys

Closures?

Hopkins also suggested: "women have to toughen up. Women can't ask for equal pay, they should be paid on performance. Look at shortlists of women for jobs; is that equal treatment, or, is it special treatment?"

No, it's positive discrimination — women are the world's poorest and most marginalised group.

Of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty around the world, 70 percent are women. Women earn 17 percent less than their average male counterparts. Not to mention domestic labour — shouldn't that get some recognition?

Richard Keys said he never expected the debate to be such a public ordeal,

denying had had been sexist and comparing the conversations to "lads' mag banter" which provides some catharsis allowing him and his male workmates to relax before broadcasts.

Women's oppression is still so entrenched that this derogatory discourse, allowing men to unite, feel superior and in control is dismissed as banter.

Feminists should challenge this type of sexism and right-wing perceptions like Katie Hopkins'.

As it stands, there are only two female referees in the Premier League. No doubt attitudes put forward by slime balls like Gray and Keys are going to put more off for years to come.

Solidarity with Palestinian women workers

By Jade Baker

At the end of November, members and friends of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty took part in a ten-day delegation to Israel and Palestine. We visited Palestinian activists resisting the Israeli occupation, Israelis supporting them and workers', women's, youth and left organisations in both countries.

On the last leg of our delegation we were invited to the Second General Conference of Women for the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), who organise around 300,000 public and private sector workers.

Despite the pressing injustice in the West Bank it is a testament to the PGFTU that women's liberation remains a priority.

17 percent of PGFTU members are women; (women make up 14.8 percent of the labour force). The union seems to be making real ground with women workers internally too; women run over 90 percent of projects. They have also run progressive campaigns that positively affect the everyday lives of women.

In the 1996 run up to the Palestinian Authority elections, PGFTU worked alongside women's organisations to abolish the Jordanian law — that women needed their male relative's permission to travel abroad. They fought for the marriage age to be raised from 15 to 18, and for



Israeli and Palestinian women join together on International Women's Day 2008 marching for more jobs and against poverty and unemployment

sex education in schools. Unfortunately these issues fell off the agenda with the second intifada in 2000 and the Fatah-Hamas conflict, but both are now back on track.

The women's conference offered us an insight into the working lives of Palestinian women: their average work day is 15 hours and the pay 10 shekels per day, about £2. Palestinian women also have a great deal of unpaid work to do — agricultural work and domestic labour. 67 percent of the women who aren't in the labour force say it's because they have too much work to do in the home. And 46 percent of highly educated women are unemployed.

Head of the PGFTU's Women Department Amneh Rimawi, said at the conference that "women are one of the main groups suffering as a result of the occupation". They lost their husbands who they once depended on and have taken on the responsibility for the whole family. They lost their

homes in Jerusalem territory disputes. To top this off, women (and children) have increasingly become the victims of a morose type of domestic violence, fuelled by anger and frustration borne out of the Israeli occupation. The "16 Days Campaign" is raising awareness of domestic violence.

REBUILD

Another PGFTU activist explained to that one of the main tasks for Palestinians, besides fighting the occupation, is now rebuilding civil society.

Women's organisations have organised to force the Palestinian Authority to sign a "Declaration of Women's Rights" but its implementation is held back it is said, by financial constraints.

The declaration included laws to protect women from discrimination and harassment at work; the right of mothers to keep their children, and made honour killings, still legal under Jordanian law, illegal.

Glimmers of hope can be found in the fact that before the Oslo peace agreement in the early 90s, women's campaigning was around nationalist, liberation and charity work. Today, in a distinct political twist, women's networking is based around campaigns for rights in education; government; business and trade unions.

Other Palestinian workers' organisations are also organising women. The Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre, unionise women in the kindergarten, pharmaceutical and handicraft trades.

The Workers' Advice Centre (WAC) is an Israeli-Arab organisation that is campaigning to unionise Arab women in Israel, currently just 18 percent of the workforce. WAC also builds solidarity between Israelis and Palestinians to end the occupation.

These are the kind of organisations the left in Britain should be making solidarity with.

Stop the cuts that will kill women

By Rosie

I work as a domestic violence worker for a central London health trust. Before the prospect of any cuts, the refuges and domestic violence services I work with were already under pressure — not able to meet demand for their services, the refuges never having to wait to fill a room. Now it is and will become much worse.

Women fleeing violence arrive in the small hours, often with children, few possessions, still carrying evidence of their latest injuries; unable to tell anyone where they were, to have visits from family and friends, often not trusting family and friends.

The pressure on women to stay with a violent partner is sometimes very strong, yet the effects of violence on women is still not recognised.

This was evidenced in the most cruel way by the 2009 imprisonment of a woman in North Wales whose husband had raped her. Under pressure from him and family she retracted the allegation against him and so she was charged. Not for a false claim as the police knew he had raped her, but for a false retraction!

Her children were left in the care of the perpetrator.

It is almost unthinkable that such an act of barbarity can have occurred but let it serve as a warning for anyone who has faith in the bourgeois justice system.

This case and others like it also demonstrate just how far we have to go in fighting violence against women.

In England and Wales in 2009-10 more than one in four women were affected by domestic violence and on average two women a week are killed by a current

or former male partner.

According to the Department of Health at least 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence and this is probably an underestimate

It is incredibly difficult for women to leave a violent relationship and often the one crucial thing that makes a difference is the support they receive from specialist services and the fact that they have a safe, anonymous place to go.

Yet according to Refuge, one in three Local Authorities do not provide any refuges or specialist services.

Worse, for those areas which do have services the cuts are already threatening to seriously damage their provision.

The recent announcement that ADVA (Against Domestic Violence and Abuse), the umbrella organisation for DV provision in Devon, were facing 100%



cut to their budget is a cruel reminder of what the Tories are really all about. ADVA have stated clearly that the outcome of such cuts will ultimately be the loss of life as women are unable to leave violent men, putting not only their lives but those of children at risk. This is the Tories Big Society.

There are sure to be many more proposed cuts in local authority funding. The good news in Devon is that following a huge outcry, the council looks set for a

partial u-turn. But it is not good enough — these services cannot afford any cuts.

Statutory services, including my own are just not in a position to take up the slack, are themselves under resourced and overburdened.

In the next period identifying where local cuts are going to fall and organising local and national campaigns to protect domestic violence services is going to be a vital part of our activity. Stop the cuts that will kill women!



The real Ann Widdecombe

Ann Widdecombe has become something of a “national treasure” after her performance on Strictly Come Dancing. She has been praised for her “good nature and resourcefulness”. Voted back week on week showed people were actually warming to her.

But Ann Widdecombe who has been a Tory MP in Maidstone since 1987, is a supporter of “social conservatism” — read social engineering.

She is a dedicated anti abortionist, has opposed every equality measure concerning homosexuality in Parliament and defended the policy of shackling pregnant women to their hospital beds.

She is a “true blue”: Tory in her commitment to family values and her conservatism can be clearly seen in her late in life conversion to Catholicism after the Anglican church conceded on the ordination of women priests.

Oh, and Ann Widdecombe has campaigned for the Tories to adopt a policy of employer led private insurance to cover health care — a USA type system.

Ann Widdecombe a walking talking advertisement for true Toryism and a mean spirited, anti-feminist, narrow-minded, nasty bigot to boot. That’s the real Ann Widdecombe.

Women of Hull Against the Cuts

By Alice Marshall

With a grand total of one woman regularly attending the local trade union organised anti-cuts committee and only a handful active in the student movement in Hull, the need for women to organise collectively here is dramatic!

One of the few women’s centres in Hull has just had a 100 percent funding cut and is quietly preparing to close. The work it does

around sex education in an area with one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe and the help it gives women leaving violent relationships and its nursery are being replaced with... nothing.

Women of Hull Against Cuts (WHAC) is a small but ambitious group of local activists.

We know that when the council cuts local care provision (as it is doing) it will be mostly women who pick up the slack and

change bed sheets rather than leave their relatives lying in filth.

WHAC will have had our third meeting by the time WF goes to press. Currently we are focused on building the group, and intervening in existing anti-cuts bodies in Hull, encouraging women’s participation.

At a public meeting about the cuts a WHAC member was one of two women on the 12 strong platform. We have had a

strong presence on both the Manchester TUC demonstration and at the anti-EDL rally in Luton.

We have also been instrumental in getting the Women’s Committee at Hull University to hold a meeting encouraging women students to run in the sabbatical elections.

We are hoping to grow enough to be able to mobilise as WHAC and are planning to hold a public meeting on the 100th International Women’s Day.

Big society has a big cost for women

They say, We say

By Esther Townsend

The “Big Society” is central to the Tories’ election campaign and ConDem coalition government policy. Instead of services being provided by an “inhuman, monolithic” state, communities can run their own post offices, schools, libraries, transport services, and housing projects.

This is a “big advance for people power”, they say. Individuals and communities will have greater control, rather than policy being dictated “from above”. A new era of community will be established as people work together to shape services and support each other. The transition to this “Big Society” will be supported by “expert organisers and dedicated civil servants” so people won’t be left in the lurch. Sounds great, right?

Wrong! In reality the “Big Society” is a way for the government to make massive cuts and attacks on public services, while making us think it’s a good idea.

It is not a particularly new idea. Thatcher’s plan to change Britain “from a give-it-to-me, to a do-it-yourself nation” has led social policy since the 1980s. If people will do things for free, in the name of fostering a culture of “volunteerism”, the government can make even bigger job cuts.

There are also implications for service provision and quality if public services are taken over by charities and volunteers. For a start where will the money for resources

come from with government funding cuts?

And if “Big Society” means running vital services like education and health with volunteer workers that means untrained people have little or no experience and few rights. There is also no certainty of provision — the idea relies on getting enough volunteers to turn up to work consistently. As volunteer labour cannot be relied upon to consistently provide a quality service the effect will be less communities pulling together and more vulnerable people left without support.

Women will feel the negative impact of the “Big Society” the most. Working class women already stand to experience the biggest attack on their jobs. Cuts to housing benefits, child maintenance, lone-parent benefits, income support and services for childcare, domestic violence support or sexual and reproductive health will hit women hardest. The Tories say these services will be replaced in the community, but many people simply do not have the necessary support networks.

In any case these services require trained workers and confidential, safe and reliable spaces. Women as the more frequent carers will also be left to fill the gap left by cuts to services and benefits their dependents access like education, disability, mental health and pension and older adults’ services.

“Big Society” will consolidate sexist attitudes — pushing women back into the domestic sphere where their work goes un-valued, un-waged and un-supported, destroying their opportunities for work, study, leisure and independence.

They say “Big Society” — we say women workers build solidarity together and with other workers to fight back against this attack on our class and for our liberation!



Get Active!

National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts Women’s Liberation meeting — 21 February (London). A discussion of how the cuts will affect women students and education workers, and what we can do to fight back!

For more info: www.anticuts.com

Feminist Fighback is an anti-capitalist feminist activist network. Current projects include:
 * A briefing which outlines the facts about the political implications of the ConDem policies as they affect women and discusses why fighting these cuts is both a feminist and a class issue.

* A workshop — Why the cuts are a feminist issue — available as a Powerpoint Production. Designed to be used and adapted independently by a wide range of groups.

* Fighting the childcare cuts — producing a newsletter in East London for nursery workers and parents to highlight cuts and build networks for resistance.

* A reading group and project — “In And Against the State” — looking at how public services are actually experienced by workers and those that use it.

www.feministfightback.org.uk
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Women Against the Cuts fighting the cuts from a feminist perspective. Groups in London, Merseyside and Hull and elsewhere.

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A great awakening

Elaine Jones begins a four-part history of the role of women workers and socialist activists in the Russian Revolution.

The role played by working class and socialist women in the 1917 Russian revolution highlights many important lessons for socialists. What were the political events that shaped the involvement of women in the Russian revolutionary movement? What kind of women got involved? What change did the Russian revolution bring for women? Why did some socialists organise among working-class women?

In the latter half of the 19th century Russia was still primarily based on a rural economy. But change was coming — cities were growing rapidly, industrial production was increasing and the old feudal social order was being shaken.

A woman's lot in life varied according to which class she belonged to. Upper class women sometimes owned property. But all women were considered subordinate and expected to be submissive to men. Divorce was difficult. In law women were considered to be worth half of a man. For peasant women, and the increasing numbers of urban working-class women, life meant poverty, endless labour and abuse. But circles of better-off and middle-class women saw themselves as part of the intelligentsia and were challenging their allotted role. Some were involved in radical politics.

In the 1860s the Russian intelligentsia's movement for political change began in earnest. This movement was broadly utopian socialist — their socialism was based on communal land ownership organised by the village. The movement would develop in many directions and its ancestors continuing into the twentieth century. They were known as "the Populists" or "Narodniks". Maybe as many as a quarter of the different groups and networks were women.

These women sought access to education and through writings and petitions won segregated schools for women, some university courses and a medical school. This was Russia's first feminist movement.

By 1900 the Russian Women's Mutual Philanthropic society had been established. Even though it was for peaceful reform their organisations was still illegal. They also did charity work — "helping" the poor and prostitutes.

One wing of the Narodniks used terror tactics to avenge the brutal actions of the autocratic Russian state and, so they believed, to spark an uprising. Women were involved in these actions.

By 1908 many of these female activists were dead, imprisoned or exiled in a Siberian colony.

Russian Marxism, as it developed after the early 1880s, was in part based on a rejection of the tactics and politics of the Narodniks. They wanted to build an organisation that would base itself on the growing working class, against the bourgeoisie.

Small numbers of women were involved in the first Marxist circles from the beginning — Vera Zasulich is the most well known — working like the men in very difficult conditions, under constant fear of arrest by the Tsarist police. The first congress of the Russian Social and Democratic Labour Party was held in 1898.

In 1900 Lenin (living and working abroad) helped set up the newspaper *Iskra* (Spark) to help organise the new organisation, and to relate to a growing workers' movement. The second congress of the party was held in 1903 in Brussels and London. There the party separated into two factions — the Bolshevik (majority) faction and the Menshevik (minority) faction.

The whole period from the late 1870s to 1900s was a time of awakening of class consciousness among the Russian proletariat, of strikes and walk-outs. Women were a large part of the new proletariat.

Women workers took an active part in the worker revolts at the Krenholm factory in 1872 and at the Lazeryev textile factory in Moscow in 1874.

They were involved in an 1878 strike at the New Cotton-Spinning Plant in Petrograd. They led a weavers' strike contingent in the workers' demonstration in Orekhovo-Zuyevo, during which factory buildings were wrecked. That action forced the Tsarist government in 1885 to bring in legislation prohibiting night work for women and children.

The new and intensified wave of worker disturbances in the mid- and late 1890s saw working women playing a full

role. The socialist (later Bolshevik) Alexandra Kollontai described what these struggles meant for the woman worker:

"In these struggles as in all those that follow the woman worker, oppressed, timid, without rights, straightens up to her full height and becomes equal as a fighter and comrade. This transformation takes place unconsciously, spontaneously, but it is important and significant.

"However, no sooner had the wave of bitter strike struggle passed... than the women were once again isolated from one another, still unconscious of the need for organisation."

Kollontai explained that "In those years it was still unusual to find a woman worker in the illegal party organisations. The life led by six million proletarian women in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century was still too dark. A 12-hour, or at best an 11-hour working day, a starvation wage of 12-15 roubles a month, accommodation in overcrowded barracks, the absence of any form of assistance from the state or society in case of illness, pregnancy or unemployment, the impossibility of organising self-help as the Tsarist government savagely persecuted any attempts at organisation by the workers — these were the conditions surrounding the woman worker."

This in part explains why the women involved in building the underground socialist movement in Russia were sometimes from middle class, wealthy, even aristocratic backgrounds who had to leave their parental homes, break with their past and even leave children to the care of others, to become fighters against social injustice.

AFTER 1905

Between January 1905 the autumn of 1906 Russia was consumed by mass strikes and protests. As the strike wave spread many women workers were amongst the first to walk out. Women were at the front of the demonstrations on 9 January 1905 — Bloody Sunday — when 150,000 striking workers and their families marched through St Petersburg to deliver a protest to the Tsar only to be shot and ridden down by the army.

The revolution which began in 1905 saw the first Soviets — self-organised democratic workers' decision making bodies — which show how working class self-rule is possible. Delegates were elected from factories, work places and army barracks, and committees set up to organise self defence, policing, militias, to make laws, and control production.

Those events turned many women into revolutionaries — teachers, school girls, students, and the intelligentsia.

These are some of the stories of those times.

Two non party students assisted a Bolshevik urban guerrilla group prepare an armed uprising in Kronstadt. Both were shot, one while pregnant.

The Bolshevik Olga Genkina was torn to pieces by the Black Hundreds (Tsarist-loyal terrorists) who found her carrying a suitcase with propaganda and arms.

Yakoleva was pulled out of a May Day demo and jumped on by armed men — she recovered from her injuries and remained a key organiser and fighter.

Rozaliya Zalkind served as an *Iskra* agent — she directed the Moscow uprising of December 1905 in charge of deploying armoured trolley cars on the streets. In 1917 she once again organised armoured cars and divisions of men and women.

Many of these women were converts from Populism to Marxism. They had been inspired by heroic deeds and the horrors of capitalism but now Marxism gave them a method of struggle and a scientific understanding of the world.

The more revolutionary women were won to Bolshevism and they took part in all levels of the organisation. They were organisers and teachers. They were couriers and smugglers. They distributed literature and weapons, organised and spoke at meetings. In 1905 these women learned administrative and military skills which would be used again in 1917.

Most would marry someone in the party. Some children were born in prison. Children of underground couples had to be taught how to conceal publications and leaflets. One daughter of a Bolshevik agent wondered why her mother gained and lost weight when travelling from flat to flat and was confused as to why her parents who always told her to tell the truth when they were forever lying about what they were doing!

— 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 Russian women workers were beginning to organise and take action

Many women's groups were set up. The Women's Progressive Party and the Alliance for Female Equality were established by middle class "bourgeois" feminists. But women workers were also now thinking about their political rights as well as making economic demands. Kollontai explains,

"That women workers were no longer indifferent to their lack of rights is also shown by the fact that, of the 40,000 signatures on petitions addressed to the First and Second State Dumas [undemocratic Parliaments set up by the Tsar] demanding that electoral rights be extended to women, a large majority were those of women workers."

The collection of signatures was organised by the Alliance for Female Equality and other bourgeois women's organisations but was conducted at plants and factories. The woman worker still naively accepted the hand held out to her by bourgeois feminists. These "suffragettes" — like their equivalents elsewhere in Europe — turned to working women to get support and to organise them into purely feminine, supposedly non-class, but essentially bourgeois alliances — to win rights for bourgeois women! However, a healthy class instinct and a deep mistrust of the "fine ladies" saved women workers from being attracted to this kind of feminism and prevented long-term or stable fraternisation with bourgeois suffragettes.

For the women of the working class, exhausted by the burden of intolerable working conditions and the material insecurity of their families immediate demands were somewhat different: a shorter working day, higher pay, a more humane attitude on the part of the factory administration, less police surveillance, more freedom of action.

The bourgeois feminists were particularly disappointed by their initiative among domestic servants. On the initiative of the bourgeois feminists, the first meetings of domestic servants were held in St Petersburg and Moscow in 1905. The domestic servants eagerly responded to this call to "organise" and turned up at the early meetings in large numbers. However, when the Alliance for Female Equality tried to organise them according to their own tastes, i.e. to set up an idyllic, mixed alliance between lady employers and domestic employees, the domestic servants organised their own special trade unions.

The domestic servants' movement overflowed the boundaries predetermined for it by the feminists. During 1905 domestic servants organised direct action even in the most remote regions of Russia. This took the form either of mass strike action, or of street demonstrations. The strikes involved cooks, laundresses and maids; there were strikes according to profession, and strikes that united all domestic servants. The demands made by the domestic servants were usually limited to an eight-hour working day, a minimum wage, more tolerable living conditions (a separate room), polite treatment by the employer, etc.

This political awakening of women was not limited to the urban poor. For the first time in Russia, the Russian peasant woman took to protest. The end of 1904 and the whole of 1905 is a period of continuous "petticoat rebellions".

The peasant women attacked military and police headquarters where the army recruits [involved in a war with Japan] were stationed, seized their men folk and took them home. Armed with rakes, pitchforks and brooms, peasant women drove the armed guards from the villages. They were protesting against the intolerable burden of war. They were arrested, tried and given severe punishments.

In this protest, as elsewhere, a defence of peasant (class) interests and of purely "female" interests are closely interwoven.

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.

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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

