



WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

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BY AMINA SADDIQ

AT 28, Malalai Joya is Afghanistan's youngest member of parliament, one of only a handful of women MPs. And Joya is a consistent fighter for women and girls. She has taught literacy classes and ran an orphanage and health clinic. She has spoken out against the continuing dominance of the warlords, religious fanatics and drug traffickers in Afghanistan's stitched up and botched together post-Taliban parliament.

For this, for being a brave fighter for the oppressed, Joya has now been suspended by her "fellow MPs" from Parliament. Joya has also received many threats on her life.

Joya's suspension took place under Parliamentary rules which forbid members from criticising each other. When other MPs have done this they have not been suspended. But then they are not militant women who refuse to compromise in the face of tyranny.

Why is the campaign to defend Malalai Joya so important?

In the last two years there has been a resurgence of the Taliban in parts of Afghanistan; they have made links with some warlords and tribal leaders (although many people are simply intimidated in doing the Taliban's bidding), as well as Pakistani jihadist group. They have made murderous attacks: planting roadside bombs, carrying out suicide bombings, killing teachers and rivals and perceived trouble makers. As before a big part of their operations involves harassing women, burning schools especially, trying to eliminate education for girls.

The Taliban has benefited from the weakness and peculiarity of government in Afghanistan — an issue which people like Joya have sought to highlight and change. Some of the local leaders and warlords who were pushed to the fore in the 20 plus years of civil war were integrated into Hamid Karzai's government after 2006. And those that were excluded from government under pressure of either the UN or Afghanistan's new Parliament have been allowed to continue to rule the roost in their own areas or given titular roles. These men too have made life very hard for women and girls.

It is true that the new constitution with its elected President and National Assembly could have been a countervailing pressure — as long as people like Joya could be democratically elected. But, here again, there is weakness; the constitution left intact many of the old sharia institutions.

Once again women fearful when they go out without burgas or other heavy coverings. Girls can now attend school, but many do not attend or attend only sporadically. Their families fear (or say they fear) attack.

Much of the suffering of women and girls remains a matter of "custom and tradition" — such as not being able to escape abuse at home. But these problems are exacerbated by the conditions of the country: minimal infrastructure, poor security, corruption in public life.

Women like Joya are fighting the weight of tradition, old reaction and new corruption. We need to mount an international campaign in her defence.

Defend Malalai Joya!

DEFENCE COMMITTEE
FOR MALALAI JOYA
www.malalaijoya.com



www.workersliberty.org/women

Police fail 'honour' crime victims

BY SOFIE BUCKLAND

As the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq campaigns against honour killings in Kurdistan (see www.workersliberty.org/node/8491), news of honour killings in Britain has been splashed across the press. Centring on the case of Banaz Mahmud, a young Kurdish woman, whose uncle and father have just been convicted of her murder, British press coverage exposes the failure of police to take this kind of violence seriously.

Banaz told police on at least four separate occasions that her family were trying to kill her. Her transgression was to leave an unhappy arranged marriage and start a new relationship. No one took her seriously despite a high-profile police protocol on honour killings, announced in 2004. As with many superficial police attempts to catch up on gender-based violence and rape, little training is available and officers report a "postcode lottery" as to whether young women reporting honour crimes will be helped or ignored.

Groups like Southall Black Sisters report a lack of understanding amongst police of the complexities of honour crimes – as a kind of domestic abuse, and the interplay between forced marriages, honour killings, and high rates of suicide amongst young Asian women (at three times the national average, likely to be concealing more honour crimes – currently estimated at a rate of 12 killings a year, with a raft of related issues such as forced abortions, imprisonment and rape).

Southall Black Sisters and the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation are now calling for an investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

The left and the 'veil'

BY PAT YARKER

Some on the left argue that Muslim women have taken to wearing the 'veil' (used here to mean such attire as the niqab or burqa) as a political act with a positive content. They read in veiling "a statement of support for anti-imperialism, and an expression of solidarity with co-religionists under attack. They point to aspects of Frantz Fanon's writings about the Algerian war of independence against the French as a vindication of this position. Conscious of my own identity as a white atheist male, I want to argue that there are problems not only with citing Fanon in relation to "veiling", but with any would-be-socialist stance taken towards the "veil" which is motivated only or primarily by opposition to the occupation of Iraq.

Marginalisation

Writing out of the Algerian liberation struggle (1954-62) in which he took an active and dangerous part, Fanon claimed that the "veil" was "invisible" in Algeria prior to the war for independence. It was simply "a fact of life". In claiming this he dismissed the history of anti-"veiling" in the Arab world, and the realities of Algeria's patriarchal cultural norms. For Fanon the "veil" was only a symbol of national liberation and indigenous identity, not of patriarchy too. Some have argued this was to rationalise Algerian conservatism.

Fanon also asserted the liberation movement's victory in Algeria would liberate women. It did not. While his insights into the struggle against colonialism remain significant, Fanon's attitude to women as expressed in his writings, some of which contain crude sexism, continues to be criticised.

His essay *Algeria Unveiled* (1959) claimed Algerian women who "veiled" did so in support of Algerian cultural norms and hence the liberation-struggle. This text was a revolutionary call to rally support for national liberation which for Fanon took precedence over everything else, including questions of women's equality. Fanon never quotes Algerian women directly in his essay. He speaks "for" them. Female agency was likewise spoken-for during the struggle, subsumed to the (male-determined) tactics of the moment. Deeply naturalised patriarchal norms empowered male fighters to prevent or constrain women's autonomous involvement simply on grounds of gender. To cite Fanon uncritically today perpetuates the marginalisation of women in the struggle for their own liberation, a struggle which in Algeria has been particularly tragic.

French soldiers forcibly "un-veiled" Algerian women during the war. They also raped, tortured and abused Algerian women as a deliberate policy.

In opposing female face-covering it is important for Leftists to avoid being positioned as "rescuers" of Muslim women from



An Afghan woman in the burka — the US/UK war on Afghanistan was justified to liberal feminists on the grounds of "liberating" women from this religious dress

Muslim men, the position used by the French to attempt to justify their actions. It is also important to recognise the dialectical working of the "veil", how it can be understood simultaneously to "protect" and "repress", "safeguard" and "segregate", within a complex social context. These complexities make it likely that a woman's individual and conscious decision to cover her face may be prompted as much by a variety of economic and social factors as by political and/or religious motivation. A statement of solidarity with co-religionists, and/or of opposition to imperialism, may play a part.

So also, research suggests, may a desire or need to position herself to best advantage in securing a husband. On this view, choice of dress operates as an outward sign of inner piety. Such a sign enhances marriageability in cultures where not only is marriage expected, but in which a woman's obedience to norms associated with currently-dominant readings of Islam are especially valued. Pious women are seen as more likely to maintain good (that is, normative) family relationships and to raise children to do likewise. So adopting the "veil" can boost a woman's value in the marriage-market, and enable social mobility.

Boosting conservatives

Some on the Left who see Muslims in the West under particular attack as a result of the "war on terror" feel it incumbent as anti-imperialists to give unconditional support. This has translated not only into defence against racist attack (about which the Left is united) but also into quietism about certain

Islamist organisations and "authorities" whose political agendas are antagonistic to socialist demands. The claims of "anti-imperialism" are deemed sufficient to neutralise any exposure of reactionary positions embedded in the politics practised by groups which organise firstly on the basis of religious affiliation.

In recent times this has led some on the Left to accept gender-segregation at political meetings, to smear certain Iraqi trade unionists as collaborators, to avoid defending gay rights, and to give a platform or an audience to those whose co-thinkers holding state power imprison, assassinate and oppress our fellow-socialists.

The "veil" remains contested within Islamic societies. To claim that an increase in the numbers of women "veiling" means a rise in anti-imperialist sentiment or of Islamic solidarity is to avoid facing the contested nature of the issue.

Not only are such simple explanations inadequate, they may also serve to boost conservative religious elements who wish to extend the reach of the veiling-imperative already at work in Islamic societies and communities. Such claims may also undermine those working in their communities and societies against the "veil" and for women's rights untrammelled by religious doctrine.

It is these people, in my view, whom socialists should be prepared to try intelligently to support. The Qu'ran enjoins "modesty" for both men and women. It is ambiguous about "correct" female attire. It does not assert plainly that women should cover their faces. Matters to do with the interpretation of a text written (and re-written) some thirteen hundred years ago have been the province of men for centuries, and subject to the pressures of patriarchal social structures. What is regarded as "proper" Islamic dress has changed across time and place.

Any discussion of the "veil" cannot help but mobilise multiple overlapping historical and contemporary meanings about what face-covering signifies and how it should be read or understood. Class as well as gender issues will come into play at once.

To claim that "veiling" should be read as a gesture of anti-imperialism can be a manoeuvre to prevent more comprehensive understanding, of the kind required for adequate Marxist analysis. How to recognise, on this view, the "veil" as a relic of Islam's own imperialist past, counterposed in Algeria for example to indigenous African dress? Or to acknowledge the "veil" as a sometime class-signifier, worn by privileged women who did not have to work? How, most urgently, to regard those Muslim women who would emulate Huda Shaarawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, whose public self-unveiling in Cairo in 1923 shook the country and remains an inspiration?

High court "purity ring" challenge

As I write this we are awaiting the High Court judgement on the case that a 16 year old girl, Lydia Playfoot, has brought against her school for stopping her wearing a "purity ring".

The idea of "purity rings" is imported from the Christian right in the United States. They are aimed at young people and are supposed to represent their commitment to chastity until they get married. They are the symbols of a movement called "The Silver Ring Thing". The rings are inscribed with a reference to the biblical verse I Thessalonians 4:3-4, which translates as: "God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honour."

They are part of a general picture of mounting religious pressure on young people, particularly young women in this country. But do

they even work? Do they keep young women "chaste"?

In the USA, research, including some published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, suggests that, unsurprisingly, lots of teenagers pressured into taking these types of pledges continue to have sex. More worryingly some research shows an increase in unprotected oral and anal sex amongst those who have taken these pledges.

The case against the school rests on the argument that refusing Playfoot's right to wear the ring discriminates against Christians. She argues that Sikhs and Hindus are allowed to wear their religious paraphernalia, and that Christians should be allowed to wear theirs. The school counters that the ring is not central to a Christian's beliefs.

Whilst clearly we cannot rely on schools or the High Court to protect young people from

the increasing interference of reactionary religion in our schools, we can hope that the High Court supports the school's ban. Regardless of whether they do, we must fight to ensure that the education unions take up the fight for secular education. That the unions launch a serious, militant campaign in favour of decent sex education, which fights against the anti-woman, anti-sex agenda of all the religious bigots.

Perhaps this case will give the left pause for thought over their stance on the veil in schools. Or maybe it will demonstrate that the left only becomes concerned when its their "own" white little girls who come under pressure to conform to the outdated, sexist, mumbo-jumbo of the resurgent religious right.

Duncan Morrison

Remember Harriet Law

★ SOCIALIST FEMINISTS ★

BY LAURA SCHWARTZ

In 1868 Karl Marx wrote a letter to Kugelmann announcing the election of Harriet Law to the General Council of the First International. The election of a woman to the otherwise all male International was, in 1868, certainly noteworthy.

In Britain and most of Europe women were still denied any form of parliamentary representation, including the vote, and were also excluded from or marginalized by many radical political movements. In theory, Marx recognised that the struggle for socialism would never succeed unless it included women.

In the same letter he went on to remark that: "Anybody who knows anything of history knows that the great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex (the ugly ones included)."

The unpleasant sting in the tail illustrates the inability of some socialist men to join the dots between their professed politics and their personal conduct. Harriet Law was merely one in a long line of socialist feminists to struggle against such attitudes found both in and outside of the left.

Harriet Law was born in Essex in 1831. After her father lost his small farming business he moved his family to the East End of London, where Law began to teach in a Sunday school in order to help support her family. She had been brought up as a Strict Baptist, and remained a pious adherent of this faith until the age of twenty when she attended a Secularist meeting in a dingy back room in Mile End Road.

Although it was not common during this time for women to speak on public platforms, let alone counter a male speaker, Harriet Law stood up and challenged the atheist speaker with Christian arguments.

Over the next few months, in which she debated further with leading Freethinkers, Harriet Law began to reject her former religion in favour of atheism and a commitment to the Secularist movement.

Organised Freethought, or Secularism, had emerged out of the collapse of the Owenite and Chartist movements in Britain in the 1850s. It was a movement of mainly working people who were committed to revealing the corrupt and superstitious nature not only of the Established Church but of all religions. Although Secularism was never comparable in size to its radical predecessors, Owenism and Chartism, or to subsequent socialist or labour movements, it nevertheless occupied a central place in nineteenth-century radical politics, drawing together an Enlightenment tradition of rationalism with a populist plebeian anticlericalism.

Secularism also fostered an important feminist current, in part because of its connections to the Owenite movement from which it had emerged. During the first half of the nineteenth century the Utopian Socialist Owenite movement developed the first coherent socialist feminist analysis. Women such as Emma Martin, who was Harriet Law's heroine, condemned the system of private property for turning women into commodities, and sought to do away with the institution of marriage, which they saw as simply another form of prostitution. Instead, they argued, men and women should be joined together in free love unions, childcare and housework should be carried out collectively, and women should play a full role in political life.

Harriet Law continued this tradition of socialist feminism. As a full time Secularist lecturer she toured the country attacking Christianity for the subordinate role ascribed to women in the Bible, in which God had created Eve merely as a plaything for Adam and St Paul had banned women from speaking in the churches.

Harriet Law's new career as a full time

activist and public speaker was not an easy one. Left-wing meetings in the 1860s and 1870s were no more glamorous than they are today. Often they were small, usually taking place in the upstairs rooms of pubs, or (when publicans refused to rent out their premises to dangerous "infidels") on street corners, where passers by would laugh and heckle. Sometimes hostile audiences would become violent, and on one occasion Harriet Law's lecture was interrupted by angry Christians, pelting stones at the window of the lecture hall. When she tried to escape she was mobbed by the crowd and struck in the face by a gentleman.

Harriet Law's transgression of acceptable gender roles and opposition to the oppression of her sex led inevitably to panic among those concerned to keep the fragile gender and class hierarchies in place.

A woman who dared to speak in public to low-class audiences was automatically deemed unrespectable, particularly one who insisted on discussing sex, politics and religion. Harriet Law bravely challenged male clergymen to debate her, and was unperturbed by their jibes that as an uneducated female (especially one so unwomanly as to leave her husband at home caring for her children) her ideas were worth nothing. As a socialist feminist today, I find it somehow heartening to think of how our predecessors often found it as hard as we do to persuade our opponents to openly debate us. Like us, Harriet Law was dismissed as an irrelevance or as a dangerous extremist.

A Mr. Woffendale of the Bible Defence Association, who had been slandering Harriet Law behind her back, refused to discuss his criticisms openly, saying that he "could not debate in the streets with a woman, and especially one of Mrs Law's class." Undeterred, Harriet Law warned him that "his cowardice should be known as far as her tongue or her pen could reach."

The more respectable, Christian-influenced, women's rights movement that emerged during this period also attempted to keep their more militant sisters in the Secularist movement at arm's length. Another Secularist, Elizabeth Wolstoneholme, was virtually barred from the suffrage campaign that she had done so much to build when she entered into a free love union and became pregnant. Millicent Garrett Fawcett led the drive to exclude her, on the grounds that Wolstoneholme's radical politics and unconventional personal life threatened to damage the women's movement, which had to appear moderate in order to convince the powers that be to grant them their demands.



Marx: "great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment"

But many people did support a more radical, militant, angry kind of feminism. Sometimes thousands would flock to hear Harriet Law inspire them with her vision of an entirely new world in which human beings were no longer divided by religious bigotry, where workers no longer had to spend twelve hours a day producing profits for their bosses, and where men and women might come together as intellectual and political equals.

In 1876 Harriet Law and her daughter began to edit a Secularist newspaper which became a vehicle for their socialism, feminism and atheism. The paper took a strong anti-imperialist line at a time when the British ruling classes were glorying in the expansion of empire. Their opposition to colonialism was motivated by their anti-religious views, and they condemned the way in which Christianity provided a justification for the oppression of subject nations.

Harriet Law also reported on the activities of women in the German Social Democratic Party and called for more women from her own country to combine the struggle for socialism and feminism in the manner of their German sisters.

In 1879 Harriet Law retired from the Secularist movement; perhaps driven out by hostility from its leader Charles Bradlaugh, who was a notorious opponent of socialism; perhaps superseded in her role as foremost female Secularist by the more middle-class, prettier and more ladylike Annie Besant. When Harriet Law demanded that women should have the vote, be granted access to education and employment, and allowed to marry whomever they liked, she was told that she was a utopian, an extremist and a madwoman.

Many of these battles have now been won; others have not. But Harriet Law is certainly worth remembering for anyone who wants to carry on fighting.

Porn at work is not ok

Cath Fletcher's article in *Women's Fightback 2* "What's wrong with liking porn?" is the flip side of what Sofie Buckland described (*Women's Fightback* no. 1) as campaigning against porn as a way of "expressing distaste". Whilst some anti porn campaigners base their viewpoint on their dislike of porn, Cath seems to be basing her arguments on women liking porn. Like or dislike is really not the point.

We need more open discussion of sex and sexuality in our society, as Cath says, but the availability of pornography does not in itself promote that discussion. The objectification of women's bodies in pornography interacts with sexism in society. By merely concentrating on the issue of the availability of pornography (which Cath seems to think is the hallmark of a liberated society), she trivialises some key issues.

How pornography is used in the workplace is an issue that cannot be dismissed as a matter of overly sensitive women workers, as Cath implies in her article. In many (mainly male dominated) workplaces porn is used to humiliate, intimidate and exclude women at work. The placing of pornographic images in women's lockers (or sending it by email), the putting up of pornographic calendars in public work areas, the holding of works dos in venues where there is erotic dancing, the showing of pornographic videos at residential training events etc., are all designed to tell women workers to know their place.

I have experienced all of these, and I haven't had it too bad for a woman who works in a "traditionally" male job! This sort of low level hassle is only the thin end of the wedge that can and does lead to bullying, sexual harassment and assault at work. These are real problems that cannot be dismissed by appealing to libertarian values.

To tackle these issues it is right to regulate the display of pornographic images at work. Pornography in the workplace is nothing to do with the freer expression of sexuality. It's got everything to do with sexism.

Maria Exall

What is Women's Fightback?

Women's Fightback is a new paper produced by women in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. We hope it stimulates debate, but whether you agree or disagree please get in touch, and contribute articles, reviews and letters to this paper. Here is a brief explanation of who we are and what we stand for.

WHO WE ARE

We need to revive the women's movement in the UK, Europe and world wide. That movement needs to be able to inspire the many young people who want to fight sexism, but who may not call themselves "feminist".

What kind of feminists are we? We stand for a socialist feminism. We believe women's oppression is part of class society in general and capitalism in particular. It is an integral part of the system of profit and exploitation. We need to replace capitalism with something better — a classless, socialist society.

But the fight against women's oppression is

not something to be put off until the socialist future.

We believe that there can be no revitalised working-class movement without women organising and asserting their rights. We also believe there can be no effective women's movement without connections into and leverage in the labour movement.

There have many inspiring examples of working-class women organising to change conditions for themselves, to change the shape of the labour movement and to change the world — from the German socialist women's movement of the 19th century and the working class women's suffrage movement led by Sylvia Pankhurst, to Women Against Pit Closures, the Gate Gourmet workers and the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq.

WHAT WE STAND FOR

- Tax the rich! Rebuild the welfare state — cuts, closures and privatisations often affect women most acutely.
- Against sexism in the labour movement —

the demands of women workers should be central to trade union struggles.

- For free, good quality childcare.
- For legal safe abortion on request. Against any winding back of abortion rights.
- Against religious fundamentalisms. No repression and persecution of women in the name of religion!
- For free movement of workers and refugees world wide — no borders!
- For sexual freedom and liberation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.
- Against sexism in our schools, colleges and workplaces.
- Against all forms of violence against women: sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence. Increase public funds to provide adequate support services for women.
- For solidarity with women workers world wide; against sweatshop labour.
- Against sexist images, against censorship.

Women's Fightback, PO Box 823, London, SE15 4NA

Gay Pride — we still need to fight!

BY MARIA EKALL

London Pride, taking place over the weekend of 30 June-1 July, is an event which points towards liberation. The right to celebrate our sexuality in public is an important part of our freedom.

This year's Pride takes place in a year when we have seen bans and protests against Pride in other countries. The Mayor of London will be attending London Pride, but the Mayor of Moscow has banned Moscow Pride. Neo-Nazi groups and religious reactionaries have targeted Prides in many countries. In Jerusalem a Jewish fundamentalist protestor was arrested with a homemade bomb, created for use against the Pride march there.

For many years socialist LGBT activists have expressed the view that Pride in the UK has become more of a party than a political movement, which is true. However we should also remember our right to party is evidence of political freedom.

With the progressive changes in the law on LGBT rights over the past ten years in the UK it is easy to forget that people in same sex relationships face criminal charges in 74 countries worldwide. In nine of those the state puts people to death for loving someone of the same sex. In many other places the state turns aside while LGBT people are



London's first ever Pride in 1971 was more militant than we're used to today

harassed, persecuted and killed. Often the influence of fundamentalist or reactionary religious groups encourages and justifies this violence.

Equality under the law for LGBT people in Britain was held back by the Tories all through the 80s and 90s. These decades saw an increase in tolerant social attitudes, but

reactionaries stirred up backlash politics to avoid acting on these changes.

Once a Labour government was elected in 1997 the demands of LGBT activists were translated into legislation, not least because of the long standing support and involvement of the trade union and labour movement. Reactionary politics on sexuality was sidelined, but it has not gone away.

Now the political task for LGBT activists is to make these changes in law in the UK become the basis for lasting social change, not the ephemera of the pink pound and the "business case" for equality. We need a democratic working class based LGBT movement able to root out homophobia and keep prejudice and bigotry at bay both in workplaces, schools, colleges and in our local communities.

Despite the changes in the law, and a growing popular consensus in the UK we have seen unprecedented joint religious opposition to the recent improvements in LGBT equality in public services provision, the so called gay adoption row. Watch this space for the same forces to be on the march against the future harmonisation in equality law, the Single Equality Act, the Government is planning to introduce next year.

Meanwhile let's enjoy our freedom. Happy Pride!

A real strategy for equal pay

BY JANINE BOOTH (CHAIR, RMT WOMEN'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE - PC)

The Women and Work Commission was New Labour's attempt to address the embarrassment and injustice of the enduring gender pay gap. But its report was woeful, in great part blaming women and girls for going into low-paid jobs and men and boys for renouncing those jobs for better-paid work.

The Government has now published a report on the work it has done in response to the Commission — entitled 'Towards a Fairer Future'. And as befits a woeful Commission, it's a woeful report. It emanates from the Department of Communities and Local Government, and is thus under the auspices of the woeful Ruth Kelly.

You might think that employers would be seen as part of the problem — after all, who else is it that are paying women less than men?! But no, they are the solution! We have 'exemplar employers', no less, best practice, partnerships, and plenty of praise for companies from Goldman Sachs to John Lewis.

The major thrust of 'Towards a Fairer Future' is that the government (in partnership with business, of course) wants to help get women out of their low-paid jobs and into managerial posts. Note that they want to get women *out* of these jobs, not make the jobs better paid. Now tell me, if the government succeeds in training x number of women cleaners to become managers, then who is going to fill their cleaning jobs?! Let's see — more low-paid women! (or possibly immigrant men).

The government's report is much less about effectively tackling women's low pay

and much more about buttering up employers who are "progressive" enough to want to exploit men and women on an equal basis. So the government offers to subsidise employers to train up new managers so long as they are women! And not surprisingly, some employers are happy to take them up on this, although not enough to keep up with the targets — every sector is currently falling short.

None of this should surprise us, since the government's "Train to Gain" project is employer-led through and through, and training is delivered through Sector Skills Councils, in which employers take the money and run, and through which Further Education is undermined.

Now, maybe I'm stating the obvious here, but ... Surely the answer to low pay is to ... erm ... increase pay. The government could dramatically reduce the gender pay gap overnight, by: increasing the pay of female-dominated, low-paid public sector jobs eg. cleaners, school meals workers, crossing wardens, nurses etc. (reversing privatisation and bringing them back into public employment where necessary); and increasing the minimum wage to a decent level.

Of course there are other issues too, such as availability of affordable childcare. And cutting working hours — sticking your kids in nursery from dawn till dusk is not necessarily the solution. And doing away with overtime and performance-related pay, under which women earn less because in general, they are less able to put in the extra hours required due to caring responsibilities.

And there is the persistent reality that women's waged work is both an addition to, and often modelled on, our unpaid work in the home. Maybe we can not expect this

New Labour government to collectivise housework for the liberation of working-class women, but hey, we can fight for it to increase wages and to reverse its attacks on the welfare state!

We discussed the issue of equal pay at the recent meeting of the TUC Women's Committee. One particular angle for the discussion was the "current equal pay problems" in local government — the "problem" being that paying out the money that Councils owe women for persistently under-paying them for years will cost a bit, some of them reckon that cutting men's pay is the answer, and the government refuses to bail them out. This issue probably deserves a separate article.

The Committee was presented with a "Strategy Paper" about equal pay and invited to note it. We were only invited to "note" it, rather than propose changes to it, because it had already been submitted to the government! This was my first TUC Women's Committee meeting since being elected, so this did not bode well.

The paper went into some detail about the local government situation and proposed legislative changes. I'm not going to comment on those here, because the main point for me is that we need a different kind of 'strategy paper' — one that sets out a strategy for fighting for equal pay. Such a paper would, I think, include such things as a massive national campaign for a big increase in the minimum wage, effective unionisation and organising efforts aimed at low-paid women workers from hairdressers to cleaners; and support for strikes for higher pay.

The good news is that TUC Women's Committee agreed to my proposal that we should discuss and agree such a strategy

paper at our next meeting in October.

(See www.workersliberty.org/node/2057 for a section of the Workers' Liberty pamphlet *Comrades and Sisters* which discusses why equal pay legislation has not actually brought about equal pay.)

London Socialist Feminist Reading Group

Monthly meetings to read and discuss history + ideas - all welcome.

Our next meeting will be on the politics of equal pay: Friday 28 July, venue TBC

More info: volsunga@gmail.com or phone 07815 490 837