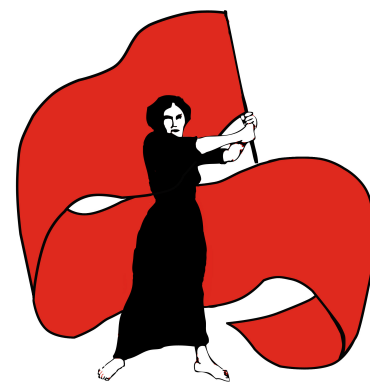
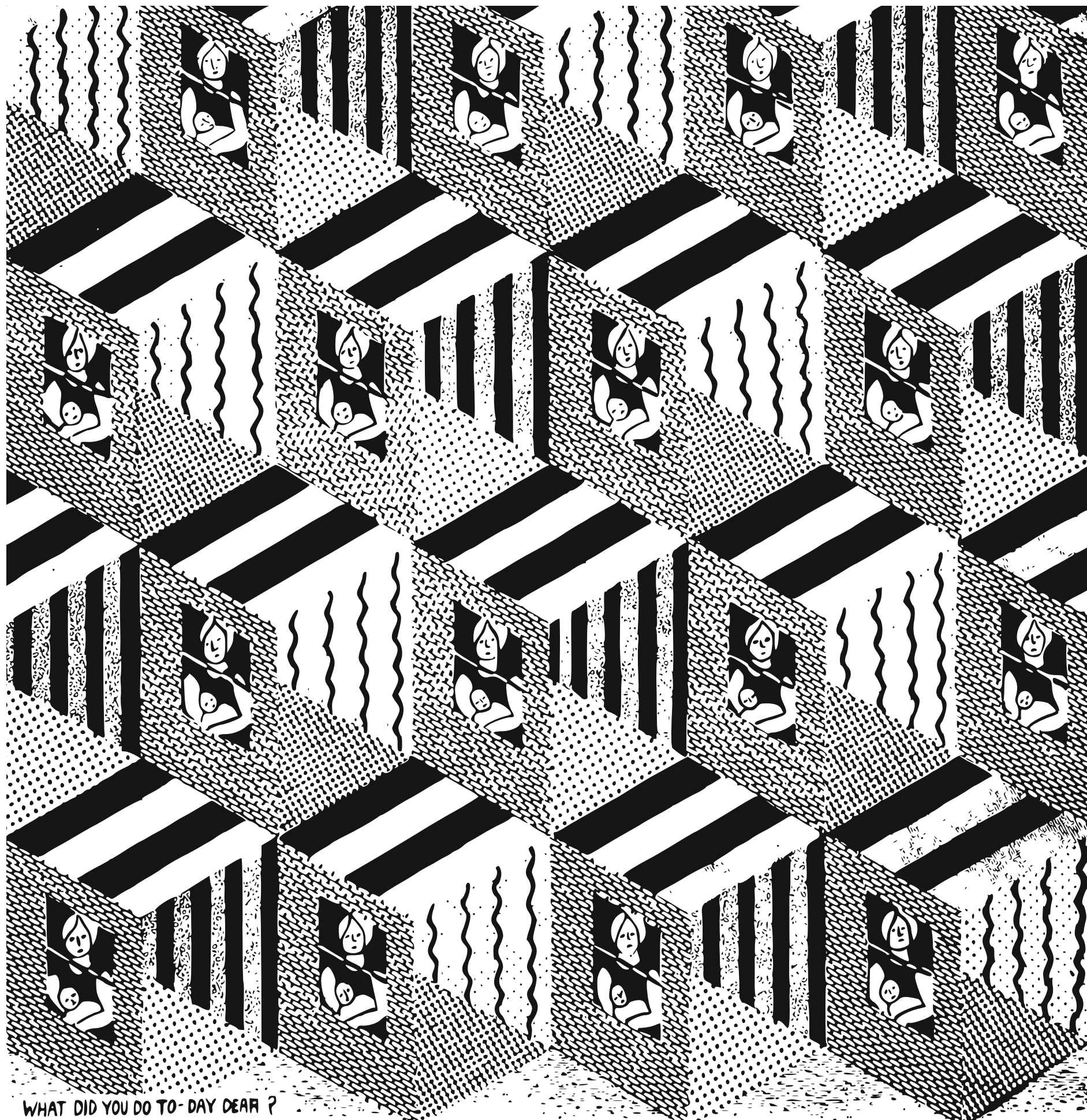


WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

A SOCIALIST FEMINIST PUBLICATION PRODUCED BY WORKERS' LIBERTY



08.03.20



WHAT DID YOU DO TO-DAY DEAR ?

ADAPTED FROM A POSTER BY SEE RED WOMEN'S WORKSHOP (1975)

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- 1 STRUGGLES OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT
- 4 NO ABORTION TERM LIMITS
- 5 CATHOLICISM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS / ABORTION AND DISABILITY
- 6 ON GENDER
- 7 BABIES, BROODERS AND THE ABOLITION OF GENDER
- 8 SEXIST BASTARDS
- 9 AGAINST SEX-BASED FEMINISM
- 11 FIGHTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT + THE 1909 SHIRTWAIST STRIKE
- 12 IS DE BEAUVOIR WORTH READING?
- 13 COMBATTING TRANSPHOBIA: EDUCATION NOT EXPULSIONS
- 14 WHO CAN STOP TRUMP?
- 15 THE RADICAL HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



STRENGTH AND AUDACITY WE HAVE NEVER BEFORE KNOWN

JILL MOUNTFORD

"...the Ford women have definitely shaken the women of the country."
- Rose Boland, one of the leading women in the Equal Pay Strike at Ford Dagenham, 1968.

"We have achieved more in six weeks than the politicians and trade unions have in years."
- Mary Denness, one of 'Headscarf Revolutionaries' who changed health and safety laws for fishermen working on the trawler ships in Hull, 1968.

"It felt like the culmination of something. It didn't feel like the absolute beginning."
- Sally Alexander, in an interview 20 years on from the first Women's Liberation Conference in 1970. Sally was one of the two main organisers of the conference, a trade unionist at the time studying at Ruskin College, Oxford.

A movement is born

Sally Alexander is right, the first women's liberation conference, as Sheila Rowbotham claims, is the moment when "a movement could be said to exist". But it wasn't the beginning. Much had happened in the 1960s - a time of rapid cultural, social and (to a lesser extent) political change - to make this conference the next logical step in the battle for women's equality and liberation.

The organisers were hoping for 100 or so women to take part but, all in all, 500 people attended the conference. At the end of a weekend of discussion and debate, four fundamental demands were formulated for the new Women's Liberation

Movement (WLM): equal pay; equal education and opportunity; 24 hour nurseries and free contraception and abortion on demand. These summed up what the participants considered to be the essential foundation for women's liberation.

Sheila Rowbotham wrote in *Women's Resistance and Revolution* (1972), "women's liberation brings to all of us a strength and audacity we have never before known." This was expressed in many ways but most powerfully in the struggles led by working class women during the period.

Working class women fighting back

The 1970 conference was inspired by the Ford Dagenham machinist's strike for equal pay in 1968. Following three weeks of striking the women won a significant pay rise, though not (yet) equal pay. The strike helped set in motion the 1970 Equal Pay Act (as did Britain's obligations after joining the European Economic Community and the necessary condition of equal pay in the Treaty of Rome article 24).

Another group of working class women in Hull, wives and girlfriends of trawlermen, organised an incredible campaign for better health and safety for the fishermen after three trawler boat tragedies in early 1968. These women were tagged the 'Headscarf Revolutionaries' after they set up the Hesse Road Women's Committee and drafted a health and safety 'Fishermen's Charter'. In less than two weeks they gathered 10,000 signatures.

Big Lil Bilocca led the campaign in the face of sexist abuse, harassment and even death threats. She lost her job and was blacklisted. But she didn't waiver. She spent many freezing cold hours on the dock checking the ships for health safety before they left for sea and was known to throw herself on the deck of ships that failed to comply with the Fishermen's Charter. Big Lil threatened "If I don't get satisfaction I'll be at that [Harold] Wilson's private house, until I do get satisfaction in some shape or form." Wilson, the Labour Prime Minister, eventually met with Big Lil and agreed to all of the charter's demands. The Hessle Road Women's Action Committee made national headlines, even, for a short period, knocking the Vietnam War off the front pages.

Rowbotham describes how small women's groups and action committees like this "mushroomed" following the first women's equality demonstration on International Women's Day in 1971. The WLM was started by and remained dominated by socialist feminists; women who were part of the labour movement, even when critical of its failings.

The Night Cleaners

May Hobbs, a working class feminist and trade unionist, cleaned offices for a living and set up the Cleaners Action Group with the goal of unionising night cleaners - low paid, precarious workers. She approached other women to help, such as the Dalston women's liberation workshop, and before long Sheila Rowbotham and Sally Alexander were among her recruits. The campaign ran from 1970 to 1973. It was something socialist feminists were directly involved in and, as Rowbotham says, it was "part of a wider attempt to foreground women workers and challenge trade union complacency

about women's subordination". In less than 2 years the Cleaners Action Committee had unionised more than 75% of the women cleaners, but the T&GWU officials remained indifferent and elusive. The indifference and dismissiveness shown by the trade union bureaucracy to this struggle (sadly, something all too familiar today) meant that a number of women involved turned away from class politics and the labour movement.

The Trico strike

The 1976 Trico strike is all too often forgotten about, overshadowed by the mammoth battle of Grunwick which started three months later in the same year. It was a battle for equal pay and a test for the new law passed in 1970 but not enforced until 1975, which had given employers 5 years to find ways round the law. Trico bosses thought they'd cracked it after implementing a segregated workforce, with men on the night shift and women on the day shift doing the same job for different rates of pay. When five men joined the day shift and four hundred women discovered the injustice the battle began. After 21 weeks of strike action, the women won, despite their bosses taking the dispute to tribunal. The women and their union decided to ignore the tribunal, instead organising round-the-clock picket lines.

The strikers could see that they were part of a broader movement, a bigger struggle. One woman striker said, 'We're carrying the rod for all women, let's see it through to the end... A victory for us will be a victory for all women - so we have to win'. In one of the strike bulletins, they argued 'We are tired of hearing that, if they have to pay women more, they will have to lay men off. 'YOU CAN'T DIVIDE AND RULE US!' and, 'We shall say to the world - "OUR MOVEMENT WON FOR US THESE RIGHTS

AND NOBODY WILL TAKE THEM AWAY FROM US—UNITED, WE WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED"'.

It is worth taking stock of what we have lost over the past four decades. This 21 week dispute was started by a show of hands. The women were uninhibited by postal ballots, thresholds, or restrictions on the number of pickets. This alone does not explain the strike's success and significance, but it does show us how we are fighting today with one hand tied behind our back.

The Grunwick dispute

In the summer of 1976, the Grunwick strike began. Many of the strikers had recently arrived from Uganda following a purge of its Asian minority. It was widely assumed that they would be compliant and desperate workers, house-trained to work in poor conditions for bad pay. Nothing was further from the truth.

Led with immense determination and dignity by Jayaben Desai this dispute lasted 2 years. Peaking in the summer of 1977 with a picket line of 20,000, the dispute was ultimately lost after their union and the TUC withdrew support. It was a pivotal moment for the labour movement, which demonstrated to trade union bureaucrats and employers alike that the militancy of the early seventies could be suffocated, and no doubt gave great inspiration to the Tory Ridley Report team, who were already drawing up plans to destroy the miners' union. The Grunwick dispute ended just weeks after the last ever WLM conference in June 1978.

...continued overleaf



A movement in decline

There were eight annual WLM conferences in total, with the last conference having 3,000 women taking part. As with any mass political movement there were conflicts, arguments and debates, discord and sectarianism. At the second conference in 1971 some Maoist men and women tried to take over the Women's National Coordinating Committee, which had been set up at the 1970 conference to coordinate things in-between conferences. Socialist feminists and radical feminists united against this sectarianism, and the WNCC was abandoned in favour of a structureless, leaderless movement.

The unity between those two strands of feminism did not last long. Soon a third strand, revolutionary feminism raised its voice, asserting that capitalism was not the enemy, but men. At a revolutionary feminist conference in 1977 it was agreed that "Male supremacy is the system by which men as a class oppress women as a class". The 1978 WLM conference ended in complete disarray. The socialist feminists organising the event were accused of purposefully leaving a revolutionary feminist proposal off the agenda, which called for the abolition of the now six demands passed at the '70, '74 and '77 conferences, arguing it was "absurd to demand anything from a patriarchal

state - from men - who are the enemy".

The plenary descended into further bitter rows when revolutionary feminists wanted to amend demand number 6 (an end to discrimination against lesbians and the right to a self-defined sexuality) by paring down the demand to 'an end to discrimination against lesbians' and making the right to a self-defined sexuality just part of the general statement. Accounts of the conference report cacophonies of insults, slow-hand clapping, the closing down of microphones and a group of revolutionary feminists congregating in the middle of the hall during the discussions to sing their 'war' songs.

In the aftermath *Spare Rib* argued, "we need more time together... In order to grow, we need to keep on exchanging feminist ideas." Other socialist feminist press, such as *WIRES*, were far more reluctant and pessimistic. One activist involved in *Scarlet Women* editorial board argued in 1979, "Caught up in a great amount of work we had little time to think about or develop theory about what we were doing".

In less than a year Britain would elect its first woman prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. She and her government would spend the next decade attacking every concession our class, women and

men, had fought for and won. The women's movement was not dead though, Greenham women and, more importantly, Women Against Pit Closures were part of a new generation of women that were creative, courageous, determined fighters.

The legacy of second wave feminism, despite all the schisms and differences that developed, had a huge impact on the lives of women everywhere. It is now commonly accepted that men and women are equal; that women should receive the same pay as men for the same work; women should have the same educational opportunities; violence against women is unacceptable; women should have control over our bodies and reproductive rights; and that people can self-define their sexuality (though less so their gender - a battle being fought now). These are widely accepted as our rights but remain some way off in reality. Moreover, the progress we have made is very much under threat with the growth of the populist right. As always, in times of economic crisis it is working class women who suffer the most from cuts in pay, jobs, and welfare. Our history, both first and second wave feminism, informs us that working class women, socialist feminists can organise and fightback, we can develop our ideas, take up the arguments and we can win. ■

WOMEN'S LIBERATION 50 YEARS ON SPEAKER TOUR

50 years ago, the first National Women's Liberation Conference voted to adopt four key demands: equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24 hour nurseries and free contraception and abortion on demand. This conference marked the transformation of second-wave feminism into an organised, mass movement in Britain, a movement that gave voice, confidence and strength to millions of women. Workers' Liberty will be celebrating this anniversary throughout 2020, beginning with a nationwide speaker tour.

For details of dates and venues visit:
www.workersliberty.org/50years

To organise a meeting in your area contact:
office@workersliberty.org

Picture: abortion rights campaigners march through Belfast, October 2019





AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE, AS LATE AS NECESSARY

RUTH CASHMAN

Our reproductive rights include the right to dignity, information, and bodily autonomy and integrity. In a world where so much of the framework of sexism has been control of women's sexuality, body, and reproduction, our right to make autonomous decisions about our own body and reproduction is central to our right to physical and psychological integrity. We know that under capitalism there is a limit to the choice and control we have over reproduction, but we push for the greatest possible bodily autonomy.

In some places we have seen steps forward in reproductive freedom, most recently the announcement that Argentina is to legalise abortion. And yet, our reproductive rights are a battleground and have been pushed back in many countries – we have seen a reduction in both sexual health services and maternal and neo-natal services- austerity measures have fallen heaviest on those with caring responsibilities meaning parenthood has become more demanding, and we have seen attacks on abortion rights.

In the US the forces of reaction are pushing a range of measures designed to push back abortion rights and test *Roe v Wade*. These include laws to effectively ban abortion (Alabama), heartbeat bills

meant to restrict the gestational limits for legal abortion to six to eight weeks (Georgia, Missouri and Ohio) and reduction of limits by two weeks (Arkansas). Though there are fringes of the anti-choice movement who believe extreme legislation can overturn *Roe v Wade*, most see attempted bans and heartbeat laws as propaganda whilst actual legal restriction will only be successful incrementally. This makes defending and extending gestational limits of legal abortion a key focus for us.

Our demand should be abortion as early as possible and as late as necessary. Not only must we reject the right's demand that the first detectable "heartbeat" (electrical flickers in foetal tissue) be the cut-off, we also must reject the far more mainstream limit of foetal viability (currently estimated at approximately 24 weeks). The truth is that pregnancy and foetal development are a continuum, not a set of fixed stages, and foetal viability will change with technological and medical advances. With the development of artificial wombs which could save extremely premature babies and open real possibility for exogenesis, gestational limits based on clinical viability will leave us with a shrinking window in which to access abortion.

The truth is that no meaningful distinction can be made between an abortion at five weeks and at seven weeks – before and after the "heartbeat bill" cut-offs. Most of those pushing for the restrictions are aware of this, they simply want to reduce the number of abortions by making accessing abortion more difficult. Is there any more convincing distinction between an abortion at 23 weeks and 25 weeks? Clinically yes, but morally no. The foetus gets bigger as the pregnancy continues making the procedure more difficult and thus dangerous - this is why we want to ensure women can access abortion as early as they know they want one. Foetal viability may become relevant at the point we offer operations to transplant foetus from unwanted pregnancies into artificial wombs, but that is not what is currently up for debate. The question is, should we force the continuation of pregnancy. No, of course we shouldn't.

Though philosophical and medical arguments on the start point of human life may sway us in our individual choices on whether to carry a pregnancy to term, they should not set legal limits. Nobody should be forced to stay pregnant against their wishes. I have the ability to tell the state my wishes for my organs after I die. If I don't want my organs, they are legally bound by my decision, even if they could save another life. That means I have more of a say over my body after I've died than I do alive and pregnant.

Take a moment to consider the horrible affront to bodily autonomy the idea of legally requiring the continuation of pregnancy is. We need abortion as early as possible and as late as necessary. ■

CATHOLICISM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

íosa Críost-Ríobhca

During the current Labour leadership election, Rebecca Long-Bailey (RLB) admitted to holding religious objections to abortion rights based on her Catholicism. Whilst this has not seemed to affect her voting record on this issue, it is concerning that many on the left were so quick to jump to the defence of RLB and Catholicism in general, with some even painting those that voiced concern about the influence of Catholic belief in politics as anti-Irish.

Anti-Catholic sentiment in the UK remains a live issue in the North of Ireland as well as in parts of Scotland, and this is certainly rooted, in part, in anti-Irish sentiment. It does not however mean that we should take a soft approach to the Catholic Church as an institution. Anti-Catholic sentiment in this context is not in fact a product of people's well-intentioned critiques of the Catholic Church, but rather an entrypoint into a ethno-cultural identity. It is very possible to be a Catholic Atheist in the Irish context. As the old joke goes:

"Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?"
"I'm an Atheist"
"Aye, but are you a Catholic or a Protestant Atheist?"

The Catholic Church is, after all, an incredibly reactionary institution: responsible for the effective enslavement of women in Ireland through the Magdalene laundries, selling the children of these women to America. It an institution which has long opposed women's and LGBT+ rights, with our current Pope, widely hailed as a progressive, denouncing "transgender theory" as evil. And it is an institution which has supported practically every occurrence of historical fascism at its height.

There is a relatively common argument found in parts of the left that the feminist position to take is that even if we disagree with particular religious beliefs, we should not challenge them, because people are persecuted around the world for their religious beliefs. This is nonsensical. The left stands to gain nothing from being soft on backwards views motivated by religion.

As with all other forms of political ideas that people hold for whatever reason, we should have enough respect for them to tell them where they are wrong. In this case, RLB is very, very wrong. ■



RLB, ABORTION RIGHTS AND DISABILITY

PETE BOGGS

During the Labour leadership contest, Rebecca Long-Bailey answered a questionnaire from the Catholic church in her constituency, saying amongst other things that she personally disagreed with the different term limits for terminating a pregnancy when there is no disability (up to 24 weeks) compared to when there is (up to full-term). Whilst this alone does not make it clear if she personally wants term limits to be removed altogether or for them to be reduced to 24 weeks across the board, in the context of her other comments about abortion in the questionnaire the latter seems more likely.

After the outcry over these comments coming to the public attention, Long-Bailey clarified that this was only her personal opinion, and signed a list of pledges unequivocally opposing stricter limits on abortion. However, posing freer abortions and equality for disabled people as opposed has been a growing phenomenon, both from disability rights activists and from anti-abortionists.

In 2017, the Tory Lord Shinkwin, who has brittle bone syndrome, introduced a private member's bill attempting to restrict abortion in the case of disability to 24 weeks. He said that at present "the diagnosis of disability carries a death sentence", and referred to a "blatantly discriminatory eugenic agenda". In 2014 the Spanish Minister of Justice Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón attempted to introduce a law restricting abortions to cases of rape (up to 12 weeks) or grave risk to health (up to 22 weeks), citing the right to life of people with disabilities.

Similarly, the No campaign in the referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment in Ireland prominently used images of children with Down syndrome on their billboards. Thankfully both laws fell, Ruiz-Gallardón was forced to resign after large protests, and the referendum passed.

Down syndrome

Much of the thinking and debate surrounding abortion and disability has centred around Down syndrome. Iceland has been portrayed as carrying out mass abortions of fetuses with Down syndrome, and there claims that no children with Down syndrome are now born in Iceland due to parents being encouraged to have abortions.

In reality the truth is more complicated. The tiny population and corresponding number births per year means that the figures as presented by the World Health Organisation are misleading when read out of context, and the birth rate of children with Down syndrome is only 10% below the average across the EU. Rather, it is merely the case that Iceland offers extensive prenatal tests and counselling for pregnant people.

Prenatal tests and the information given to prospective parents has also been a topic of consternation. Previously the main way of testing for genetic conditions such as Down syndrome was through amniocentesis which is invasive and carries a risk of miscarriage, but recently this has been replaced with non-invasive prenatal testing (NIPT),

which instead takes blood samples from the pregnant person.

The campaign group Don't Screen Us Out (DSUO) has campaigned against NIPT, as it enables more widespread testing, therefore identifying more people if their foetus has Down syndrome, allowing them to terminate the pregnancy. Again, DSUO condemns this practice as a form of eugenics, and seeks an overhaul of prenatal support provided by the NHS as a prerequisite to the implementation of NIPT.

On the basis of claims by campaigners like DSUO, there do seem to be problems with the information given to expecting parents about disability. Value-laden terms such as 'risk' rather than 'chance' are used for the likelihood of having a child with a disability, and out of date information tinged with ableism is often offered. For instance, parents are often told that children with Down syndrome have a very low life expectancy despite that no longer being the case.

Many of the calculations and decisions taken by society, the market, and the state undervalue the lives of disabled people, reducing them to a burden. This is a thoroughly wrongheaded view, but unfortunately goes beyond a simple matter of attitude. No matter the dedication and love shown by the parents, it often requires serious time, money, and effort to care for disabled children. This is made difficult under a system which overworks and underpays people whilst providing wholly inadequate welfare services.

In a society which fully valued and provided for everyone in it, people could have much more freedom in how they plan their family. Decisions made by pregnant people about their own bodily autonomy or their family are not comparable to eugenics. These individual decisions are based on that person taking shape of their own life, whereas eugenics is a programme at the level of a society to consciously shape the genetic stock: the history of eugenics is one of taking away reproductive freedoms, rather than granting them.

At the most simple level, the only justification needed for an abortion should be that someone who is pregnant wants to cease being pregnant. At no point should someone be forced to carry a pregnancy to term. The public debate over disability and abortion has largely taken place around the question of term limits; while these still exist it is difficult to extract these discussions from the broader question of reproductive freedom. The disability activist Frances Ryan argues that thinking around disability and pregnancy is often a 'black-and-white dichotomy', counterposing the tragedy of having a disabled child to the evil of having an abortion. It is our job to fight for a world where neither of these acts are stigmatised. Socialists should unequivocally defend the equality of disabled people, and be unequivocally in favour of free access to abortion on demand. ■

ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

NATALIA CASSIDY

In the lead up to Workers' Liberty 2018 conference a debate took place in relation to the trans document on the social construction of gender. The comrade who raised this debate withdrew reference to opposing the social construction of gender on the understanding that further debate on the question would follow. Thus far, this debate has not materialised. This article is an attempt to rekindle that debate. For our trans document see:

<https://bit.ly/38eGaYZ>

The principle question raised in the 2018 debate was whether or not we, as revolutionary socialists should be opposed to the social construction of gender. That is to say, the ways in which society constructs differences between men and women in terms of expected behaviour, presentation and expected social roles.

Many things in society are coded as either masculine or feminine and we are all expected to conform. These norms are enforced by extremely high levels of social pressure and, as we know, when people break from their assigned gender they are often met with violence. There is, in short, a widespread culture of homophobia and transphobia and in many ways the struggles against these oppressions, as well as the fight against sexism, imply an opposition to gender as a social construct.

In my view, opposing the social construction of gender serves two purposes: firstly, it clarifies our understanding of the negative impacts of the imposition of gender on all of us in society. Secondly, it serves to agitate. This is not to say we are expecting the social construction of gender, something so deeply rooted in our social existence, to simply disappear at will, just as we don't have that expectation of people's relationship to nationality or cultural identity.

People's own identification with their gender is not realistically something that will disappear in the short or medium term. It is only something that might fade over a long time, even in a

socialist society in which class has been eradicated. What then, should we identify as what we might call a transitional demand on this issue? In the medium term our goal should be, on a societal level, to have one's outwardly-perceived sex differences have as little bearing on our lives as possible. I think that would be an opposition to the social construction of gender.

The gendering of certain behaviours and traits has a negative impact on everyone in our society. Generally speaking, feminine traits serve to place women in a position subservient to men, although men also stand to lose from gendered behaviour.

There is a crisis of mental health in the UK, this is exacerbated in men by the social pressure and expectation of fulfilling masculine ideals of strength and resilience. The gendered perceptions of men takes on a particularly insidious manifestation when it comes to black men and boys. The perception of black men as fulfilling a heightened masculinity is in part what leads to such high levels of discrimination in terms of police violence, stop and search and media portrayal. It is hardly uncommon to see black teenagers reported as "black males" whilst their white counterparts would be referred to as children, this serves to decontextualise the situation of black boys who get into trouble whilst stressing the context of their white counterparts in the same situation.

The social construction of gender affects us all and exacerbates other forms of oppression and discrimination in our society. We should certainly be opposed to it as a point of propaganda to highlight its damaging impacts, whilst understanding the clear constraints in terms of how we might express the demand programmatically. Despite the worthiness of opposing the social construction of gender, the practical implications of this opposition remain somewhat unclear. ■

BABIES, BROODERS AND THE ABOLITION OF GENDER

KELLY ROGERS

"How can men be mothers! How can some kid who isn't related to you be your child?" She broke free and twisted away in irritation.

"It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. 'Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers."

An exchange between Connie and Luciente in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy

Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* presents the reader with a feminist utopia from the future. A world in which class, racism and gender have been eradicated, and where the nuclear family has been brushed aside in favour of a setup best described by the old adage "it takes a village to raise a child." Babies are grown in artificial wombs called 'brooders'. Parents are universally referred to as 'mothers'. If a mother that is sexed-male wants to breastfeed, they can take hormones and make it possible. Children are assigned three mothers, but the community as a whole is expected to be responsible for a child's welfare and education (due to a centuries-old ecological crisis and the breakdown of large cities, these communities are, in fact, literal villages.)

This is the world that Connie, an impoverished Latina woman from present day New York, is thrown into. Despite utterly harrowing conditions in her own time, she initially reacts with disgust and horror at its strangeness. She believes, as so many believe, that there is a natural order to things: that motherhood is something inherent to people with the biological apparatus necessary to bear children. That to be a woman means to be caring and to be a man means to be strong, even violent. This is the all-pervasive, cultural ideology that underpins everything from

macho bullying to rape and victim-blaming culture ('boys will be boys' so it's up to women to stay out of the way).

Piercy's novel very persuasively demonstrates the harm of a gendered world underwritten by class inequality (most starkly when Connie, back in our own time, is admitted into a mental institution for attacking a pimp who is violently trying to force her niece into having an abortion), but most of all it challenges us to think: is the abolition of gender (and by proxy the nuclear family) possible, and what would it look like?

The central premise of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is that it is not possible to build a truly equal society without decoupling women from child-bearing and child-rearing. As socialist feminists, we believe that misogyny, homophobia and transphobia are rooted,

to a very large degree, in the gendered division of labour: the division of women predominantly into 'reproductive' care-work, initially in the home but increasingly in low-paid, caring professions, and men into the productive sphere. This gendered division of labour rests at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. It, in turn, stems historically, in part, from the fact that it was women, and only women, who could bear children and breastfeed.

Real-life brooders aren't yet available to us, and although billions are being invested into their development (for the purpose of bringing very premature babies to term, not getting rid of pregnancy altogether), it seems unlikely they'll be made widely available any time soon. And yet, the argument Piercy makes is quite convincing - for as long as 'womanhood' is so closely tied to 'mother-

hood' and women are required to bear the onerous (physically, mentally, socially) responsibilities of pregnancy, child-birth and breastfeeding alone, can we really hope to entirely abolish the cultural baggage surrounding woman/motherhood? Surely, in such circumstances, there will always be 'genders' of a sort?

All is not lost, however.

For one thing, we should not accept - cannot accept! - that motherhood need always be as physically and mentally taxing as it is now. In some senses, we've seen significant progress on that front already. Far fewer women die during pregnancy now than in times past, but the current era of cuts to NHS services, children's centres, nurseries and schools means that we're taking some big steps backwards. Most accounts of motherhood tell of severe loneliness and isolation; a phenomenon that is only getting worse as cuts bite. And it is this isolation that makes it so difficult for women to resist their lot. If their only regular human interaction is with a small child and possibly a partner, then subverting gender and motherhood seems like a very tall order.



We must set ourselves the task of not just halting these attacks and reversing cuts (though that's an important starting point!), but of re-valuing care-work and creating the conditions in which it is shared out in a more just and equitable way, liberating carers of all genders. This will include:

1. A shorter working week, probably substantially so, so that everyone has more time to undertake caring responsibilities, whether for their own children or for other members of their community; universally-available flexible working hours and expanded maternity and paternity leave.
2. High pay for care-work, which in turn implies high union density among care-workers and strong, militant trade unions alive to questions of feminism and gendered oppression.
3. Community-centred care networks, not necessarily based around heterosexual nuclear families. For many, family networks don't exist or cannot provide the support necessary for raising children. And even if they could, what is there to suggest that kinship networks are innately better

equipped for the task than communities based on solidarity and comradeship?

Redistributing care-work would also mean eliminating the gender-coding of caregiving activities, so that men feel able to perform them too, free of social stigma, and women are free to give them up without feeling like they're failing. And so we're faced with a chicken-and-egg style problem: how do we fight for and build a society that overthrows the gendered division of labour without deconstructing gender - and how can we deconstruct gender without changing the material reality that underpins people's gendered identities?

In her article 'After the Family Wage: A Postindustrial Thought Experiment' (1994), Nancy Fraser argues:

"The trick is to imagine a social world in which citizens' lives integrate wage-earning, caregiving, community activism, political participation, and involvement in the associational life of civil society— while also leaving time for some fun.

This world is not likely to come into being in the immediate future. But it is the only imaginable postindustrial world that promises true gender justice. And unless we are guided by this vision now, we will never get any closer to achieving it."

The point is that although gender *is* a social construct, it is not something that can simply be dismantled in our own heads. We cannot just think queerly and hope that our whole social order buckles at the knees. Nor should we sit and wait for a magnificent technological innovation like brooders to do the work for us. Rather, through the act of struggling against low pay and cuts to our services, against the public/private divide and archaic expectations of motherhood and family, we will tap away at the extreme notions of masculinity and femininity so widely misunderstood as natural. But we must understand as we do so, what we are aiming for: not just saving this or that service, or winning this or that strike, but a wholesale revolution against gender and everything that it stands for. ■

SEXIST BASTARDS

HANNAH THOMPSON

Some friends and I decided to organise a meeting in Sheffield on sexism at work through the local Workers' Liberty branch. We had bonded over our experience of being women training or having worked in "men's jobs", and between us we built up a small network of women engineers and construction workers meeting occasionally to drink and talk.

I think we all considered ourselves pretty 'thick-skinned' and hard-working. Most people in the group I'd met had a middle-class, undergraduate background. We were also reasonably familiar with leftist politics and ideas. At the universities in Sheffield, sexism is present but it seems to be on the back-foot. The number of women student engineers, for example, is growing but in the FE colleges and the workplaces, we were shocked at the levels of prejudice that were commonplace.

We decided to run the meeting along the lines of a 'consciousness raising' session from the feminist traditions of the 60s and 70s. It was initially uncomfortable – my experience of meetings containing nothing but emotions and anecdotes has

has not always been positive. I went to a Trans 101 NUS meeting years ago where a much older woman came in to interrupt the chair, talk at great length about prejudice and trauma, and cry, leaving the chair and attendants speechless. On the other hand some faction fights in the student movement have abused the radical sincerity of consciousness raising to manipulate and score points off each other – opening a door for a backlash.

There was also the concern we all had that our resilience and understanding of our position in male-dominated workplaces would be questioned if we talked about 'our experience', or that making events public would amplify the sexism into something more threatening, especially in our own heads. A friend who had complained of harassment to 'friends' at work hadn't been believed, and I have found that many colleagues (male and female) were genuinely convinced I had been given a job to meet a politically correct quota. All of us were knocked sideways when we discovered we had no common understanding from fellow workers.

During the public meeting we took it in turns to tell our stories. A common theme in construction and engineering is a feeling of physical weakness; having tools taken off us, jobs re-allocated or being unfairly criticised. In construction, using the toilets poses problems as women can't just pee in a hedge, and client's bathrooms are off-limits if you're covered in dust. We'd been involved in chauvinist conversations about women where men either ignored our presence or pretended we were on "their side"; we'd been humiliated and insulted then told to be tougher, or that we were wrong-headed; we'd not been believed when we spoke out.

In the meeting discussion we talked about 'culture clash' and 'inner voices'. The backlash against fights for liberation demonstrates how effectively bigotry divides us. The bad ideas expressed in good faith are not intended to hurt, but are in some ways worse than maliciousness, because they are sincerely believed. If everyone at work genuinely thinks that you are weak, you can begin to see yourself as weak, or even deluded. Anyone who is 'different' to the predominant culture becomes exhausted second-guessing (or just avoiding) their colleagues.

A (male) friend at my college once remarked on the racism and homophobia among the students that it was "just ignorance", that education can "sort us out". To an extent I think

this is true, but accepting that as the total explanation is intellectual snobbery. We end up quoting statistics and playing political 'fact tennis', when 99% of the debate is about emotion and experience.

In their book about inequality, Wilkinson and Pickett talk about the connection between bigotry and inequality, and their ideas have stuck with me:

"...human group conflict conflict, such as racism and sexism, stem from the way in which inequality gives rise to individual and institutional discrimination and the degree to which people are complicit or resistant to some social groups being dominant over others."

In other words, inequality creates shame and humiliation, and bigotry is a reaction to that. This is especially so in the workplace, where battles for status are loaded onto us by capitalism, unless we fight them with better ideas and try to overhaul the way society works.

Finally, we considered if the culture around sexism had changed (in the UK) for good, or if we would have to consider going back to basics as environmental and economic recession bed-in and the right-wing wins victory after victory – we have no answers yet, but we'll keep talking. ■



CATHY NUGENT

"Feminists do not conflate sex and gender. Sex is a scientific term for one's biology, and this cannot be changed. As materialists we believe the root of women's oppression lies in her biology, a view underpinning socialist theory for generations. Gender theory does not provide an alternative credible analysis and it is regressive. Queer theorists see the intimate connection between biological sex and oppression and react by trying to dismantle the notion of biological sex whilst socialists and feminists react by seeking to dismantle oppression."

From the Women's Place UK website.

One of the founding ideas of modern feminism was that, in spite of biological sex, women's lives are shaped by cultural interpretations of sex differences. Those ideas are what constitute gender ideology and our own perceptions of our gender identity. To paraphrase Simone De Beauvoir: nothing about being called female at birth determines what kind of life a woman will lead and what it means to be a woman. And where you live in the world, what century you were born in are two gigantic sets of variables right there.

That's why socialist feminists focused on the social institutions that generated cultural meaning

about sex difference and which helped to prop up systematic discrimination against women. For us, the family, laws, the state were always at least linked to and often determined by the same structures which generate class exploitation. In other words, as in life, biological sex differences do not matter anywhere near as much as gender. But by the early 1980s radical and cultural feminists were pushing against this materialist feminism, arguing for innate differences based on or strongly connected to biology.

Now, again, some self-proclaimed socialist feminists are trying to resurrect "biological determinism". The leading lights in the coalition around Women's Place UK - set up to block legal reforms enabling transgender people to register a change of gender by self-declaration - do call themselves socialist feminists and yet they foreground biological sex differences in a number of ways.

Firstly, biological sex difference is important for instrumental reasons. Their argument is that provisions in the 2010 Equality Act which make sex a protected characteristic would be undermined if trans people were allowed to self-declare their gender. The perceived threat here being that

self-declaration would reinforce the idea that gender (rather than sex) is innate. Except of course while gender is not innate, it can be deconstructed as much as it can be constructed, it is also nigh on impossible for humans to choose their gender identity; it is something they must live with. So why not let people tell the world without paternalistic complications?

Then the government said it had no plans to change the Equality Act and protected characteristics were safe. Still the "trans sceptics" were not satisfied. The GRA reform would, they said, lead to abusive males self-declaring themselves to be women and trying to access women-only safe spaces. The argument here is that the GRA will embolden abusive men to declare themselves to be trans women. Why they would need to do that when they have plenty of other easier opportunities to be abusive is not explained. The implication is that trans women will always be biologically male, that men are inherently predisposed to violence, and that the GRA reforms would therefore speak to and enable abusive men. It is that crude. Thankfully trans people can seek and get help from domestic violence and similar services with and without a gender recognition certificate. Professionals only have to be certain that the person coming to them

for help needs their help and the service that they can offer meets their needs.

Another form of biological determinism that has seeped into the debate is that women's oppression is based on her biology, specifically her child-bearing capacities and the necessity of child rearing. But the biological realities of bearing and bringing up children have made these activities socialised for most of human history. Women tend to die if they do not get experienced help pushing another human down the birth canal, and children have, until recently, been "raised by the village" as the saying goes.

The point is that we have to have a more nuanced understanding of biology in order to understand what human childbearing and childrearing is and then step back from biological explanations in order to see how they became progressively, but never entirely, individualistic endeavours. In any case, in advanced western societies IVF, contraception, adoption and just not bothering with reproduction have all become options for all people and have revolutionised childbirth. My 19 year old daughter often remarks that if she had been born 100 years ago she would be pregnant by now. We can't quite get our heads round that, and yet we should. We want all women around the world to enjoy human progress, so why are we holding onto the "threat" of this aspect of our biology, as if it childbearing was the same as it was 100 years ago?

Another way in which biology is foregrounded is in opposition to so-called "trans orthodoxy". This is the idea that trans activists and allies conflate sex and gender and in so doing dismantle the notion

of biological sex difference. I've already stated that there is no need to conflate the two in order to win the argument that biology isn't all that. But let's expand a bit with a few observations:

- > The human species is only weakly dimorphic. Nothing between our ears is very dimorphic and it certainly doesn't determine our sex. This used to be a key argument for feminists wishing to deconstruct reactionary gender ideologies. Why is it only now that we must pay more attention to the sex differences?
- > Biological sex difference plays very little role in our lives until puberty; there are a lot of very important years between zero and puberty.
- > Our secondary sex characteristics arise from complex interactions between hormones, environment and genes.
- > All humans have a mix of female and male hormones and the levels of difference in the mixes are not as great as is commonly thought.
- > Atypical variations in the things that make up biological sex are not unusual.

Biological sex difference is something but it isn't all that; nor is it static. It can be reshaped by the environment and, as it turns out, by human intervention.

A variant of the argument that biology can't be dismantled is one which says that "extreme gender ideologists" dematerialise true social realities (i.e. biology); that social feelings like gender cannot be all-encompassing basis for determining how people act and think. This argument is not even consistent with the central argument of modern feminism with which I began: that gender is constructed at an early age.

Judith Butler explains how it all works well in a materialist and down-to-earth way:

The institutional forms of power and knowledge we are born into precede, form and orchestrate whatever existential choices we come to make... sex and gender are 'constructed' in a way that is neither fully determined nor fully chosen but rather caught up in a recurrent tension between determinism and freedom.

We do live in a rigidly gendered society, but fortunately we've had fifty years of gender being messed up. People do feel like they have choices, hence women who have found that they like to be manly and boys try to play with the 'wrong' toys.

However if you want to say that gender roles are not changing very much, that patriarchy is not only strong but reasserting itself, and in the form of trans women "invading" women-only spaces, you need to have something you want to define as innate to make your argument. The Women's Place UK coalition have turned to the idea of sex-based oppression to do that.

It seems to me that the feminists who want to do this, for political reasons, are trying to impose a rather one-sided materiality: a biology-first materiality. But it is actually more like a moral order. People who need to get out of the straight-jacket of their biology and the identities associated with it, are being pathologised and demonised. That may be rooted in an opposition to women's oppression but it is utterly reactionary nonetheless. Gender diversity is a material part of human existence and it is here to stay. ■

MYTH-BUSTING

A report, *Supporting trans women in domestic and sexual violence services*, published by Stonewall and nfpSynergy in July 2018 established:

- 1 in 4 women (27 percent) experience domestic violence in their lifetime.
- In the previous 12 months alone 7.5 percent of women had experienced domestic violence.
- Trans women are at a heightened risk. In the same period, 16 percent had experienced domestic abuse from a partner.
- That while trans and cis women may experience similar patterns of abuse, many trans survivors also face specific forms of abuse related to their trans identity.

This may include: withholding medication or preventing treatment; withholding consent, thereby preventing them from getting a Gender Recognition Certificate (in cases where the trans person married their partner before transitioning); misusing pronouns and preventing them from sharing their gender identity with others; convincing their partner that they would not be believed because they are trans.

- One in four trans survivors of abuse do not go on to report it.

The report shared the results of study of domestic and sexual violence service providers, aiming to understand their views of the proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act. It found:

While respondents were aware of a view that gender recognition reform could allow violent men to pose as women to access their services, they said that gender recognition reform would not compromise their ability to protect their service against, or turn away, any abusive individual using safeguarding procedures.

- No participants said they have used the Equality Act exemption to deny support to a trans survivor. Some participants said that the exemption should be kept as a safeguard, while others were concerned about other services using the exemption to turn away trans survivors when they should be providing support.
- Participants stated that more needs to be done to support trans survivors, arguing that trans voices need to be at the heart of these initiatives.
- Participants said that funding cuts are the main threat facing their

services and called for increased funding for all services, including women-only services, specialist services for LGBT survivors and services for BAME women.

- Refuge reports cuts to 80 percent of its services since 2011, with these having been cut by up to 50 per cent.

- Women's Aid, meanwhile, states that 17 per cent of specialist domestic violence services have been lost altogether.

It is clear that domestic and sexual violence services are already being run in a trans-inclusive and sensitive way for all survivors. The service providers are calling loudly for the reversal of cuts and for trans survivors to be directly and centrally involved in shaping these services going forward. If we are concerned about protecting women, then these are voices we should be listening to. ■

FIGHTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK

BECKY CROCKER

According to the TUC, 50 per cent of women have been sexually harassed at work and four out of five women say that they don't feel able to report sexual harassment to their employer. And so while it's positive that the TUC's 2020 'heart unions' week foregrounded sexual harassment and the campaign for a new law to make employers do more to stamp it out, our unions could - and should - be doing much, much more to challenge conditions that silence women in the workplace.

This is no accident. Sexism and bureaucratisation combine to marginalise the issue of sexual harassment in the trade union movement. I realised this very current truth when reading a story of women workers' struggle that happened over 100 years ago. Nan Enstad's *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* tells the story of women organising in New York's garment industry, with a focus on the shirtwaist strike of 1909.

On November 23, 1909, 20,000 shirtwaist makers, 85-90 per cent of them women, walked off their jobs in hundreds of factories across New York City. Striking workers met to formulate grievances and demands. Union officials subsequently tried to collate the various factories' diverse grievances themselves. This process, Enstad argues, allowed a gap to emerge between workers' concerns and the demands officially articulated by the union bureaucracy.

"While no direct record exists of small shop meetings in the first days of the strike, a number of grievances that are not represented in the official union demands became part of the historical record. By looking closely at them, we can trace the particular concerns that striking women brought into the public debate, including sexual harassment"

One source is an article written by a strike leader, who had herself been a garment worker, Clara Lemlich. On the subject of sexual harassment, it says:

"The bosses in the shops are hardly what you would call educated men. And the girls to them are part of the machines they are running. They yell at the girls and the "call them down"... They don't use very nice language. They swear at us and sometimes do worse - they call us names that are not pretty to hear".

Other women complained of, "foremen in certain factories who insult and abuse girls beyond endurance", and "the tyranny, and sometimes worse, of petty bosses and foremen". The vague language used by the women hints at the difficulty they faced in being open about their experiences. Sexual harassment was not a recognised social phenomenon at the time and the label, 'sexual harassment', had not yet been coined.

Today, the acknowledgement that 'sexual harassment' does, in fact, exist, undoubtedly makes it easier to spot inappropriate behaviour, but it is still not easy. In my experience, there is something about the way that sexualised language takes some of the most personal aspects of your life and makes them the subject of discussion in public that makes you feel like an object of ridicule in your place of work. Sexual harassment can be subtle, it can be dressed up as 'flirting', a 'compliment' or a 'joke'. When you're in the middle of it, it can be bewildering and hard to identify how the power dynamics - between men and women, between supervisors and subordinates - interplay to equate to sexual harassment. During my time as an RMT rep on London Underground, I can think of many times that women told me, "he did this" or "he said that". Very few called it sexual harassment.

The difficulty of naming and articulating the problem persists, which highlights the urgency with which unions need to begin organising and campaigning around sexual harassment. By naming it, unions can send the message that such behaviour is not acceptable. Unions can indicate that male workers should reassess their actions and tell women that they are not on their own.

Something else interests me about the vague language that the shirtwaist strikers used to describe sexual harassment: the specifically sexual element of the behaviour. Historian Mary Bularzik has written in her article 'Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Historical Notes', that for women at the time, modesty and morality was more fiercely policed than ours is today: to "admit that sexual contact - even conversation, occurred, was to be blamed for it".

There is a much greater acceptance of women's sexuality in the 21st century, but sexism still places higher standards of sexual morality on women than men. I have worked with women cleaners on London Underground, who reported to the RMT that they had been sexually harassed by supervisors at work, but who were very concerned to keep their cases confidential for fear of people finding out. So when we wanted to run a public campaign, we couldn't, because the women who had experienced the harassment wanted to keep the matter private.

When the shirtwaist strikers organised, it was still the case that women in paid employment were seen as having stepped out of their rightful place in the domestic sphere. In the late 19th century, discourse about women workers and prostitutes overlapped: "The idea that factory girls had loose morals was commonplace", notes Bularzik.

By discussing women's private life and body in the public sphere of paid employment, sexual harassment sent a message to women: you may claim to be an equal but you are not welcome here. It served to erode women's sense that they had a right to be there and a right to equality.



The 1909 shirtwaist strike was overwhelmingly led by Jewish, immigrant women.



This, too, resonates with my own experience of sexual harassment in transport, a traditionally male-dominated industry. The labour market is still strongly segregated along gender lines, with women concentrated in the lowest paying sectors. Women's experiences of trying to push into traditionally-male, well-paid industries, such as transport, mirror what women experienced when they first fought their way into the labour force. The sexual harassment that I have faced and seen was not as light-hearted as it was sometimes presented. Its overtone was: the people who work here are men, you are not welcome here.

The way that the trade union bureaucracy marginalised the issue of sexual harassment when setting demands for the shirtwaist strike is all too familiar. In Workers Liberty we argue for rank-and-file democracy. We are critical of the way that trade union leaderships control disputes and take decisions away from the workers who are striking, sidelining the voices of the workers involved.

Bureaucracies have an inbuilt tendency to build disputes around issues that will bind workers in common cause. But what about the issues that aren't common to all workers, such as sexual harassment? It wasn't going to be an easy issue to win on in 1909, so were the women supposed to forget about it? Even today, raising the issue of sexual harassment might mean the union asking some sections of the workforce to confront their own behaviour. It will not be an issue that unites everyone. That's why unions need to work hard to cultivate a sense of solidarity amongst workers instead of building disputes around self-interest alone. Sexual harassment may not immediately affect every worker, but eradicating it will build a stronger, more assertive culture across the workplace as a whole, which every worker will benefit from.

There have always been barriers to trade unions organising around sexual harassment, but things change. Enstad notes that after 1909, women garment workers succeeded in getting sexual harassment listed amongst the official demands of subsequent strikes. By bringing the issue into the open in 1909, the women strikers were part of a process of bringing the subject to wider public recognition.

In recent years the #MeToo movement has stirred political and celebrity circles. But it still doesn't seem to have found its voice in the labour movement. But the shirtwaist strikers provide a hint of what is possible when women collectively begin to speak out about sexual harassment and back it up with action. If rank-and-file bodies and trade union branches across the movement start to have the conversation about what's going on in their workplaces and what could be done about it, we can start tackling it head on, inspired by the work of our sisters in 1909. ■



A more contemporary example of the issues Becky raises can be seen in the Picturehouse strike. In 2017 the cinema workers wanted to strike on International Women's Day, to highlight the fact that low-pay is predominantly experienced by women. The strike was shut down by their union, BECTU, on the grounds that it was "too political" and not directly linked to the strike demands.

The following year, after much lobbying, BECTU conceded, and an International Women's Day strike took place. The workers were joined by hundreds of supporters on their picket line, and linked up with sex workers demonstrating for decriminalisation and union rights.

Let's make International Women's Day a day of strikes and protest again!

IS DE BEAUVOIR WORTH READING?

DAVE KIRK

What's often called 'second-wave' feminism is sometimes dated to begin with the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir in 1949. De Beauvoir herself was critical of that claim later in life; whilst acknowledging that she had some influence on the women's movement that grew in the 1960s, she argued that it had other more pressing, contemporary influences.

It's a long book. Over 700 pages. So why is it worth reading a book long on how women have been treated in philosophy and literature and short on the specifically political? The pre-WW1 British women's suffrage movement is glossed over in less than a page but the George Elliot novel *The Mill on the Floss* gets three or four pages, for instance.

The Second Sex is not some kind of bible of the women's movement. De Beauvoir herself in interviews in the 1970s admitted that her book had dated; that she was not addressing a live movement. Her engagement with the women's movement as an activist came later in life. But it's important because it brought to feminist thought a whole raft of ideas that still resonate today.

One of the two main theses of the book is that,

through education and culture, women are seen in both male and female consciousness as the "the other". She talks about how in Christianity and other religions the male is seen as the ideal or default form and women's bodies, experience and role has been defined through perceived difference to men's: "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him."

This sense of women as "the other" is all-pervasive within culture, literature, art and philosophy. It is why the French Revolution and Age of Enlightenment were able to proclaim universal human rights while not even considering if they applied to women.

The idea of "the other" and othering has been taken up by cultural studies, critical theory and elsewhere. However, De Beauvoir saw the condition and position of women in society throughout history as determining this category of "the other", not "the othering" determining the condition and position of women in society.

The other major thesis speaks right to the heart of debates in the women's movement today: how much is womanhood socially, ideologically and economically defined by biology? De Beauvoir never uses the word gender but makes a clear distinction between "woman" and biological sex.

IS DE BEAUVOIR WORTH READING?

continued from page 12...

In her chapter on childhood she famously says,

"one is not born, but rather one becomes, woman. No biological, psychic or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society."

She doesn't entirely discount the role of biology or economic factors in historically driving women's oppression, or as an aspect of it today, but in her view, it is not the determining factor. She says,

"the woman's body is one of the essential elements of the situation she occupies in this world. But her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society; biology alone cannot provide an answer to the question that concerns us: why is woman the *Other*?"

She also believed that modern technology, women's changing role in work and scientific advances such as birth control, automation and modern medicine, have radically reduced women's potential "enslavement to the species" and made women's liberation possible in a far more radical way than it was in the past.

As for the role of the economic in women's oppression, De Beauvoir generally saw herself as deeply influenced by Marxism but not a Marxist, as such. In 1949 she was somewhat close to the Stalinist Communist Party, although she criticises the revival, under Stalin, of "patriarchal theories of marriage". She also makes a distinction between the USSR and 'democratic socialism'. She believed that being determines consciousness:

"woman's consciousness of herself is not defined by her sexuality alone: it reflects a situation that depends on society's economic structure."

But she is critical of Engels' account of women's oppression beginning with private property. She is critical of an economist or reductionist explanation of women's oppression. Women's consciousness is not just defined by her relationship to private property and class struggle. There exists a broader "existential architecture" of women's oppression that goes beyond and pre-dates the capitalist mode of production, or even private property.

There are contradictions in De Beauvoir's writing, she does not offer any real political answers, and can end up seeming to point towards women's consciousness as the be all and end all of struggle. However, her ideas are important for socialist feminists interested in the whole of women's experience and consciousness. ■

COMBAT TRANSPHOBIA THROUGH EDUCATION, NOT EXPULSIONS

CHRISTIE NEARY

This article was originally published on Labour List and has been republished with the author's permission. Find it here: www.labourlist.org/2020/02/labour-should-combat-transphobia-through-education-not-expulsions/

There is undoubtedly an issue of transphobia in the Labour Party. The Labour Campaign for Trans Rights has been set up to combat this, as well as fight for positive advances for the rights of trans and non-binary people. We do this with a recognition that the Labour Party and the wider labour movement are crucial for winning and consolidating the rights of marginalised people within society. Of course, transphobia is prevalent within society as a whole, but we must put our own house in order if we are to change the world.

This is a two-way street. The labour movement benefits from the most marginalised people being able to freely, confidently and safely organise themselves and fight for better conditions. We recognise that the fight against women's oppression and trans oppression are part of the same struggle – and those that seek to wrongly divide us only weaken our collective strength. We all stand to gain from the ability of trans people, within Labour and our trade unions, to organise and win.

It is important to address the question of how transphobia should be fought. As with similar issues of bigotry on the left, this is a point of contention. I am going to argue that we should not make the mistake of relying on bureaucratic machinery to solve problems of miseducation and ignorance. There have been popular calls amongst many of those in the party who oppose transphobia – and indeed antisemitism – to expel members who express such views. Despite this being one of the pledges put forward by LCTR, of which I am a member and co-founder, this position is understandable but misguided in my view.

There are individual cases in which protracted campaigns of harassment and bullying have taken place against activists in the party, and in these cases suspension and expulsion may be an

appropriate course of action. But the problem of transphobia is widespread. If Labour were to attempt to purge the party of transphobic views bureaucratically, it is likely to end up expelling swathes of people whose transphobic views are not well-thought-out. Instead, they may be ignorant, or see their advocacy of women's rights as being in conflict with trans rights.

Such a wave of expulsions would not only distance us from many who could, with some patience and education, be won round to the cause of trans rights. It would also serve to make party machinery the decision-maker as to who has crossed the line and therefore must be expelled. Such a situation would make Labour's current inadequate democratic culture even worse.

If not expulsions, then what? I would advocate for a concerted campaign of education on the topic of trans rights as well as a culture of open debate and discussion. This is where our ideas come from, and it is the lifeblood of a vibrant labour movement. This position can be caricatured: some assume that what is being called for is a staged debate between a trans person on one side and someone who seeks to deny trans people of their right to any kind of dignified existence on the other. This is, of course, not what is meant.

What I'm talking about is fora in which people are able to effectively challenge and convince those that hold transphobic views of the importance of supporting the rights of trans and non-binary people. We have to educate activists – including trans people, as well as cis allies – in order to give people the skills to confidently challenge these ideas wherever they rear their head in the labour movement.

LCTR will have a key role to play in facilitating education in the Labour Party and creating a culture in which trans and non-binary people are able to engage in the movement that best represents their class interests. We all stand to gain from this, and we hope that those concerned with fighting for. ■

WHO CAN BEAT TRUMP?

VICKI MORRIS

Elizabeth Warren, would-be Democratic presidential nominee candidate, had a great line in the TV debate on 19 Feb:

"I'd like to talk about who we're running against: a billionaire who calls women 'fat broads' and 'horse-faced lesbians'. And no, I'm not talking about Donald Trump, I'm talking about Mayor Bloomberg."

Michael Bloomberg: the billionaire candidate spending vast sums in his attempt to win the Democratic nomination, who bought himself a podium on the platform that night – the one, uncomfortably, next to Warren, as luck would have it.

For that great put-down Warren garnered much praise, alongside some inevitable misogynistic abuse, but also real results. After the debate Bloomberg announced his company would release three women from Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) they had signed after making complaints about Bloomberg's sexism, although Warren has retorted that there are many more women in this situation than three, and that we don't know the extent of the allegations against Bloomberg.

The debate happened in the week of the trial of Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood mogul who's sexually violent, predatory behaviour – when, after decades, it was finally exposed – sparked the #MeToo movement. Weinstein has just been convicted of sexually assaulting production assistant Mimi Haley and raping actress Jessica Mann, a mere sample of his probable crimes. Other charges may yet follow.

Following such developments, speaking truth to power when it appears in the shape of overbearing, sexually predatory men is now allowed, praised even, in the US when it wasn't before, and that is a great gain. Yet against this backdrop, the Teflon President Trump hulks, his misogyny still throwing monstrous shadows.

Twenty-two women have publicly accused Trump of sexual misconduct. His sexual politics are in the same vein as Weinstein: in the run-up to the

presidential election in 2016 an audiotape came to light in which Trump boasted of foisting himself on women and grabbing them "by the pussy". That is how he conducts himself.

In office, what sort of policies does his sexism engender? After his election, Trump quickly set about undoing Obama's – admittedly limited – progressive policies. His acts have included:

- Rescinding the requirement in Obama's healthcare law that employers provide contraception coverage.
- Rolling back a rule designed to close the gender pay gap.
- Removing US funding to any overseas organisation that offers abortions.
- Rolling back on workplace protections for LGBT people.

Trump combines sexism with racism, among his worst acts has been separating migrant parents from their children at the border. In July 2019 he tweeted that four Democratic members of Congress – four women of colour – should "go back" to the countries they "came from". Those women were Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and Ayanna S Pressley of Massachusetts. Whether always acting from personal conviction or not

on these issues, Trump plays up to his core constituencies, chief among them the Christian right, but beyond them also the racist far right.

The resistance

Trump has always had more people against than for him in approval ratings. And it is worth remembering that he won the presidency with a minority of the popular vote! On the day after his inauguration ceremony, millions of women marched in opposition to Trump, many wearing knitted, pink "pussy hats".

So who can cohere the resistance to Trump of whom these women protesters are but one component – albeit a crucial one – and prevent a Trump second term?

Well, it does not at the moment look likely to be a woman. The contest for Democratic presidential candidate includes Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren but while many feminists would love to foreground a woman president, male candidates are making the early running. An encouraging development is the good showing of Vermont senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders calls himself a "democratic socialist", although his conception of socialism is far from that of supporters of Women's Fightback – he is very much a reformer, though a radical one, while we are revolutionaries.

He is not likely to radically reform the pro-capitalist Democratic Party. But he is combative against Trump and the right on all the important issues. He talks about the working class, and could win the backing of the union movement. And he is leading a diverse, often young movement that promises to dramatically change US politics and pull it to the left.

Eric Lee, convenor of the London for Bernie group, argues:

"Sanders' unifying, class-wide message of solidarity is so powerful. Alone among the Democratic candidates, he offers real answers to those working class voters who abandoned Obama for Trump four years ago.

"If, as predicted, he wins the Democratic nomination, he will need to sharpen that message and push back against the racism and sexism that have become the signatures of the Trump presidency."

The Democratic candidate will be announced in the summer; and the election takes place in November. Between now and then a lot needs to happen to see Sanders triumph over Trump, but one thing is certain: the movement to which Sanders' candidacy gives expression holds out a rich prospect for the future, for women as much as anyone. ■



Women workers demonstrating in Petrograd on March 8 1917.

THE SOCIALIST HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

International Women's Day has its roots in some of the most significant moments of our movement's history. It is our task to remember this history and to turn International Women's Day into a day of strikes and struggle once more.

It was at the second International Conference of Socialist Women, held in Copenhagen in 1910, that the idea of an International Women's Day was first formally agreed. German delegates Luise Zietz and Clara Zetkin brought the proposal in front of a hundred women delegates, from seventeen countries. The resolution read:

"In agreement with the class-conscious political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, socialist women of all nationalities have to organize a special Women's Day (Frauentag), which must, above all, promote the propaganda of female suffrage. This demand must be discussed in connection with the whole woman's question, *according to the socialist conception*" (emphasis mine).

These delegates had aspirations much grander than simply winning universal female suffrage. They sought the triumph of socialism: the liberation of workers from drudgery and wage slavery, and the liberation of women from the shackles of domestic slavery.

The first official International Women's Day was

celebrated on March 19 1911, a date chosen to celebrate the 1848 Revolution in Berlin. In Germany, more than a million women, mostly (but not exclusively) organised in the SPD and the unions, took to the streets. They put on dozens of public assemblies, over 40 in Berlin alone, to discuss the issues they were facing in their day-to-day lives and prospects for the women's movement.

That same year, workers in the United States chose March 8 for their Women's Day. It was a significant date: In 1857, garment workers in New York City had struck and staged a demonstration against inhumane conditions and low pay. Fast forward to March 8 1908, and again 15,000 women garment workers, many of them Jewish immigrants, went on strike and marched through New York's Lower East Side to demand higher pay, shorter working hours, voting rights and an end to child labour. 'Bread and Roses' became the slogan of the garment workers' struggle: they didn't merely seek money enough to eat, but fulfilling and enriched lives worth living.

From 1914 it became common practice to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8. A famous poster depicting a woman dressed in black and waving a red flag (which Workers' Liberty has adopted for its logo) marked the occasion in Germany. It was considered so

dangerous in the run up to the First World War that police prohibited it from being posted or distributed publicly. The day turned into a mass action against war and imperialism.

Three years later, March 8 1917 (in the Gregorian calendar), IWD witnessed the explosion of the February Revolution in Russia. In spite of opposition from Bolshevik men, working class women in Petrograd turned International Women's Day into a day of mass demonstrations for "bread and peace" - demanding the end to World War One, to food shortages and to tsarism. They marched from factory to factory calling their fellow workers onto the streets and engaging in violent clashes with police and troops. Trotsky wrote in *The History of the Russian Revolution*:

"A great role is played by women workers in relationship between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: 'Put down your bayonets - join us.' The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd."

Not only did these women workers spark the beginning of the Russian Revolution, they were the motor that drove it forward. 7 days later Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. ■