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WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

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STRIKE!

RUTH CASHMAN

Women have been bearing the brunt of welfare reform long before the recent cost of living crisis. Research conducted by the Women's Budget Group showed that 85% of the burden of reforms to the welfare and tax system until 2020 have fallen on women.

Women commonly spend more of their income on non-durable household goods, for example food and cleaning products, which are typically more susceptible to inflation-induced volatility. Food prices have already soared, and the war in Ukraine, fuel costs and European drought due to climate change are driving prices even higher.

Analysis by Labour, using Office for National Statistics figures, shows that single parents with dependent children had £400 in savings between April 2018 and March 2020, compared with all households, which had £8,000. This means single parent families hit desperate situations faster when life gets more expensive.

The gendered expectations of self-sacrifice for the family means that women are more likely to skip meals to save money for other things. They are more likely to report anxiety around low pay and poverty, in part because they carry a greater share of the cognitive and psychological load of managing the household.

The cost of living crisis makes the ill-effects of women's oppression all the harder. For example, more than two thirds (67%) of survivors of domestic violence told Women's Aid they were forced to spend more time at home, and at risk, because they were not able to afford activities outside of the home.

On top of existing barriers to leaving relationships and dealing with the

trauma of domestic abuse, survivors now have a new set of barriers to face. For women sharing housing and finances with their abuser, cost of living increases have made it all the more difficult to leave. Almost three quarters of women in this position (73%) said that the cost of living crisis had either prevented them from leaving or made it harder for them to leave. This is due to the immediate costs of leaving or not being able to afford ongoing living costs on a single income or benefits which are not keeping up with inflation.

Women are more likely to be in part-time work because of unpaid caring responsibilities. They are also more likely to be in low-paid work. Women's work is undervalued; the skills involved are seen as extensions of our natural roles, rather than valued as areas of expertise and competency. There have been struggles which have challenged this orthodoxy, where women have organised militant action. Take, as an example, the strikes for equal pay by the Ford Dagenham workers in 1968 and 1984 (see opposite page).

Working class women need wages and benefits to go up. To win this across the economy we will need coordinated, high-intensity action across the economy. Tens of thousands of workers have been on strike: on the rail, on London Underground, buses, docks, oil, BT, Royal Mail, Amazon and many more. At the time of writing, hundreds of thousands are balloting, some formally and some with consultative ballots ahead of formal balloting. These include health, local government, the civil service and teachers.

The industries that have been leading this hot strike summer - transport, logistics, energy and communications - are comparatively well organised and vital for the function of British capital.

This gives them enormous industrial power. They should use it in their own disputes and for demands across the class.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch has said that he sees the RMT strikes as part of a broad struggle to push up pay, including for workers who face obstacles in striking, such as health and care workers. To declare that strikes in one industry are also on behalf of another pushes at the limits of the anti-union laws, which ban solidarity action.

Coordination has been slow but is already happening to a limited extent. We need to spread, intensify and accelerate the action. This will be the most effective way to generalise the strike from individual disputes running simultaneously to a class-wide fightback.

There are 3.66 million women in trade unions in the UK. They need to be

mobilised to fight. Some sectors with a high proportion of women workers like retail and care have extremely poor trade union organisation and corresponding low wages. There will be national strikes in industries where there haven't been for decades. We could see new industries organised and a spread of wildcat action, like we have seen in Amazon.

Some wages need pushing up far above inflation to recompense for years of real term pay cuts or historic undervaluing. Every dispute should have the demand of an automatic rise in wages in relation to the increase in price of consumer goods. Trade unions should link strikes to push for a rise in benefits as well as wages.

Every strike, even those of predominantly male workers, help our chances of pushing up women's pay. Every victory is a stepping stone to the next.

Women's Fightback is a socialist feminist publication produced by Workers' Liberty.

If you are interested in writing for Women's Fightback, wish to respond to any of the articles in this edition, or would like to contact us for any other reason, you can find us at:

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THE FORD DAGENHAM STRIKES

The strike organised by women sewing machinists at Ford Dagenham in 1968 is one of the heroic episodes of British labour movement history.

The machinists originally called for their jobs to be re-graded but it soon became clear that a big underlying problem was the existence of a 'women's rate'. Equal pay became one of the strikers' key demands, and their action galvanised a wave of wider struggles.

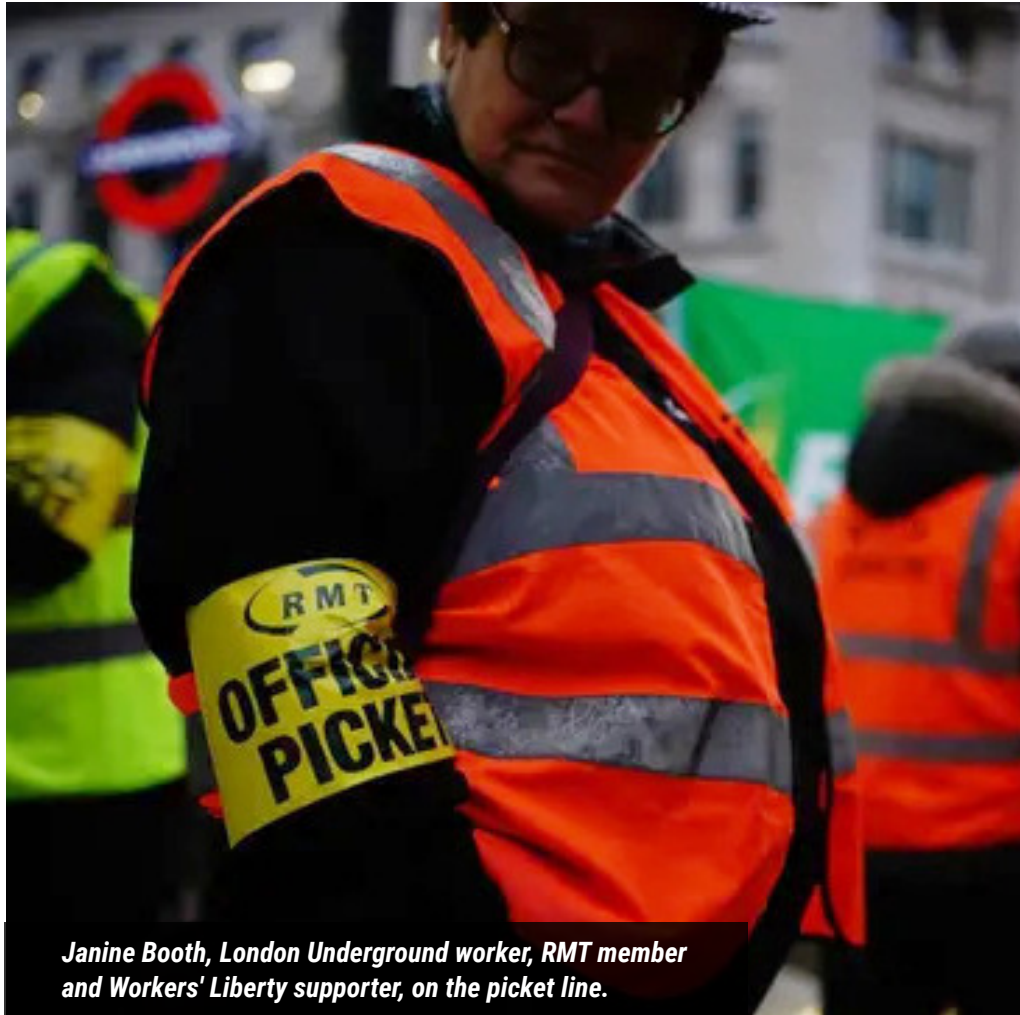
After a three-week long dispute, which brought Ford to its knees, the striking women won the abolition of the 'women's rate'. When they struck again, in 1984, they won their original demand of re-grading.

The National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights was formed by women trade unionists, inspired by the Ford Dagenham strikers. It organised a 1,000 strong demonstration for equal pay in 1969. The 1970 Equal Pay Act armed women with the right to demand equal pay with men doing "like work".



RAIL WOMEN FIGHT BACK

Rail workers on fourteen train operating companies, Network Rail and London Underground have been taking strike action over the summer. On the national railway, they are demanding a pay rise to make up for two or three years without any increase, a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies, and no detriment to their working conditions. On the Tube – where there is already a contractual right not to be made compulsorily redundant and workers have had an inflation-plus pay rise this year – they are fighting against job cuts, threats to their pensions, and attacks on working conditions. Women's Fightback spoke with several women involved.



Janine Booth, London Underground worker, RMT member and Workers' Liberty supporter, on the picket line.

"This dispute is seminal. Everything that follows will be decided by how hard we fight now. Women in the industry play an integral part of that fight. From the first women in rail in the 1800s, to the current day, it has never been more important that we make our distinct voices heard."

— Ceri, March (Cambridgeshire)

"It wasn't a deliberate women-only picket, it was just that the women stepped up for the early picket line. It helps that we have women as the President and Secretary of our RMT Regional Council!"

— Grace, Exeter

"Working-class women with children aged 0-3 work for pay that just covers the cost of childcare during those early years and sometimes does not even cover it. It can be £1000 per month per child for full-time care. Working-class people do not have the luxury to choose not to work. Rarely do you find a job being held open for three years until the point that government financial support kicks in. And still this government wants to take more from workers. Enough is enough. It is well overdue, it is time for workers to fight back."

— Amanda, Bristol

"To strike means to stand up and fight for what is right. For what we deserve. And as a woman on the Underground, I want to see our safety taken seriously. 55% of women have experienced harassment and/or assault on public transport and 4 in 5 women have experienced sexual harassment in a public space. We want to feel safe, and especially since some of us do shift work - which includes working alone at night. We deserve to feel safe in our environment."

— Ebony, London

"Our best chance of winning is to step up our action, and make sure that rank-and-file workers are driving the unions' strategy. It would be good to see the various rail unions working more closely together. The level of public support has been very encouraging – working-class people are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, and while the employers and government would like us to resent each other when we fight back, the opposite is happening. Workers in lots of public services, and in the private sector, are taking inspiration."

— Janine, London

UKRAINIAN FEMINISTS ON THE FRONT LINE

*In May three members of Workers' Liberty visited Lviv, Ukraine, to meet with members of Sotsyalnyi Rukh (Social Movement) and other leftists. We spoke to **Brie (Kateryna Kostrova)** in Lviv, and **Yana Wolf** and **Katya Gritseva** in the weeks following the trip.*

In the summer of 2021, Ukraine celebrated its independence day from the Soviet Union with a series of symbolic parades and parties. This year, it lined the streets of Kyiv with the shells of real Russian tanks, many of them destroyed in recent fighting. Since the Russian invasion in February, the country has been in a state of crisis and siege. Millions have been made refugees. All men between the ages

of 18 and 60 have been mobilised, and are banned from leaving the country. Martial law is in place. Estimates of deaths range from thousands to hundreds of thousands.

A group of Workers' Liberty members travelled to Lviv in May on a delegation organised by the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine and attended a gathering of labour movement and social movement activists. The scene that greeted us was surreal. Located in the far west of Ukraine, the city is a long way from the front line and seemed, on some level, to be going about its normal business. But stay any length of time and you realise you're in a warzone: an 8pm curfew was in force, and sandbags piled up around historic buildings. Metal sheets cover the stained glass windows of the Basilica of the Assumption. Air raid sirens go off so frequently, and with such inaccuracy, that they are simply ignored by residents.

Sitting outside a cafe on a picturesque cobbled street, we spoke to Brie, a feminist activist and member of Sotsyalnyi Rukh (or Social Movement). Social Movement is an anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist tendency which emerged from the Maidan protests of 2013-14 as a left wing alternative to the mainstream nationalist movements. It has an orientation towards the labour movement, as well as involvement in various social movements around LGBT rights, feminism and environmentalism - overall, a similar perspective to our own.

Brie started out as an anarchist while at university, and was part of various feminist circles, before joining Social Movement. "I decided I wanted to change the world now," she says, "and that meant getting involved in the workers' movement, not just reading books and doing occasional street actions, as the Anarchist movement here does". Although she is committed to Social Movement, she also tells a story that will be familiar to many socialist feminists dealing with male-dominated groups. "I was maybe the only woman in the organisation. It's hard to work with some men, because they don't listen to women, even in leftist organisations. So when I came in I wanted to change it."

A GROWING MOVEMENT

"The feminist movement has got a lot stronger in recent years," says Brie. "I got involved in 2016, about five years after it got going, and we were still really small then, with only grassroots organisations and maybe two or three NGOs operating." As with many countries in eastern Europe, Ukraine's feminist movement grew substantially in the second half of the 2010s, with street mobilisations playing an important role. "We developed a coalition of different organisations, and we could talk, discuss and organise projects and protests together." As well as her broader work within the feminist movement, Brie organised a series of campaigns and educational projects around sexual violence in universities.

Yana Wolf became a feminist aged 15 by reading online before heading to university and attending a summer 'Femcamp'. She helped to found Bilkis, a small initiative of left wing feminists from Karkhiv, Ukraine's second largest city located in the north east of the country. "It seems to me that in recent years the feminist movement in Ukraine has become more visible and stronger," she says. "There were many different initiatives aimed at involving young people in feminism and activism."

INTERNATIONAL

Within the growing movement, debate and ideological divisions emerged. "The main conflicts were about trans politics, the relationship of feminism to neo-liberalism, and the question of whether feminism was a subculture or a political movement."

Brie describes how, in 2018, left wing feminist were excluded from the 8th March Women's Day demonstration when they started raising issues of anti-Roma racism. "A Roma person had been killed that year by neo-Nazis, and there had been a lot of attacks on Roma camps," she says. "We also discovered that some Roma women were being sterilised during childbirth without their consent while under general anaesthetic, and so we wanted to talk about this. The NGOs who were the official organisers said that these topics weren't 'the Ukrainian scene' and said that instead we should make it like the marches in the USA. They created this brand, with cups and t-shirts and a logo, and renamed the demo. We were completely cut out."

WAR CHANGES EVERYTHING

The feminist movement's development, and the ideological conflicts within it,





were put on hold first by the pandemic and then by the war. Since war broke out, Brie says, things have become much more about meeting people's basic needs. "We have decided to direct all our funding towards humanitarian aid," she says. "So now we try to provide resources to women from the East and South of Ukraine, pads and tampons. Period boxes, we call them. And also we decided to help people with mental health problems, most of them women, are not receiving their drugs because of supply shortages."

Yana paints a similar picture. "Absolutely all feminist organizations and initiatives that I know from the beginning of the war began to deal with humanitarian issues: the supply of food and medicine, housing, childcare, as well as working with internally displaced persons." She has herself been internally displaced, having fled Kharkiv for Lviv when fighting broke out.

For Katya Gritseva, another feminist activist in Social Movement, the role that feminist organisations are playing

in wartime is invaluable. "In Lviv, feminist groups have begun to care for older women and provide free childcare, educational activities and psychological support groups. They weave camouflage nets, volunteer in shelters and refugee distribution sites, and fight in the ranks of territorial defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine."

Katya is from Mariupol in the east of Ukraine, and her family is now stuck in occupied Russian territory. Her contact with them is limited, but what details she gets are grim. "The city is overflowing with decomposing corpses," she says. "My family was lucky that they managed to move. Our house burned down, and now they live in a village near the city, with people they hid from bombs in the basement."

UNIFORMS GIVE A SENSE OF IMPUNITY

Gendered violence and rape are common in the war. "Most of all, I fear for my younger sister's safety and mental state", says Katya, whose family is in Mariupol. "The Russian army uses

violence against women and children as a weapon to undermine morale and destroy the victims emotionally and physically. You often hear about the rape of girls in the occupied territories, and there have already been cases when Russian soldiers flirted with my sister. Still, fortunately, nothing terrible has happened so far. Women and children are at significant risk every time they leave the house."

For months now, investigators have been documenting tens of thousands of war crimes committed by the Russian military. All reliable reports of the front line agree that sexual violence is being perpetrated routinely by the occupying army. "Weapons and military uniforms often give a sense of impunity," says Yana Wolf. "The risk of physical and sexual violence against women by men increased."

Superficially, the context of war has created an opportunity to overcome some of the divisions in Ukrainian society, but it has also exacerbated oppressions and introduced a new

level of violence into society. A spirit of togetherness has seen some Ukrainians fight side by side with people they once regarded as inferior, but this has far from solved the brutal racism faced by the Roma community. Feminist organisations have become visible in the national humanitarian effort, and something like 15% of the Ukrainian army are women. But the war has also unleashed the worst aspects of hypermasculinity, and those same feminist organisations are dealing with a sharp spike in domestic violence cases.

And after the war, Ukrainian men will come from the front. "The militarization of society always leads to a wave of conservative sentiment," says Yana. "I think the war will have very grave longer-term consequences: post-traumatic stress disorder in the military, high levels of arms trafficking - these are risk factors for increased violence against women."

A STATE OF EXCEPTION

While much of the left and the feminist movement support the war effort, things are complicated by the Ukrainian government's insistence on using the war to crack down on the left and the labour movement. Under the

'decommunisation' law of 2015, which was strongly criticised by the EU, a number of Communist organisations were already banned from standing in elections. But in March of this year, Volodymyr Zelensky suspended a further eleven parties, citing their supposed links with Russia.

"The government is undoubtedly using the law to make it harder to be a leftist," says Brie. The state of exception created by war is being exploited for authoritarian ends. "The police now have a lot more rights now", Brie explains. "It feels like every day there are new powers introduced for them. They can now arrest people without explaining why in order to interview them, and they can enter people's homes much more easily and without bringing witnesses."

In the labour market, a similar process is underway. Law 5371, which passed through the Ukrainian parliament in July, removes all employees of small and medium sized enterprises from labour law protections, a total of 70% of the overall workforce. This has come on top of a law, passed in March this year, which gave all employers the right to suspend employment - i.e. to suspend work and wages without technically

dismissing an employee. As millions of Ukrainians are internally displaced, they are finding themselves at the mercy of a largely deregulated labour market, as well as a housing crisis which has allowed landlords to cash in by driving up rents.

Sooner or later, class politics and political organisation will resume in Ukraine. There will be a fight over wages, housing and social justice, and there will also be a fight for women's liberation and for a society free from sexism and sexual violence. In that situation, there will be a dire need for a radical, progressive left that can join these struggles together. Social Movement will no doubt be a part of that left, and the role of feminists like Brie, Yana and Katya will be pivotal.

You can find out more about Sotsyalni Rukh online at:
www.rev.org.ua/english/

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Art by Katya Gritseva

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ROE v WADE

CARRIE EVANS

On Friday 23 June the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade, the first time in history the Supreme Court has overturned one of its own rulings in order to roll back the rights of citizens.

Roe v Wade was a 1973 ruling that established federal protection for abortion rights on the grounds that abortion is ultimately a private decision between a patient and healthcare providers. The right to privacy is widely recognised as being implied by the liberty clause in the 14th amendment of the US constitution, so the right to abortion must also be protected at the federal level. The 1973 court ruled that women should have the autonomy to terminate a pregnancy without “undue burden from the state” up until the point the foetus is viable.

Now, a conservative-majority Supreme

Court has ruled in favour of the state of Mississippi and its state law banning abortion after 15 weeks. In the process it has overruled Roe v Wade and declared that states can set their own abortion laws. This decision will have an untold negative impact on the lives of American women, especially women of colour and those living below the poverty line.

Within hours of the ruling, a handful of states had already effectively outlawed abortion. Thirteen states had trigger laws in place with some coming into effect immediately and others thirty days after Roe was overturned. Some states will ban abortions completely while others will outlaw it after six or fifteen weeks. In eleven states there is no exemption for rape or incest and in Louisiana they are even considering a bill that will allow women who have an abortion to be charged with homicide. At the time of publication, seventeen states have banned abortion and a further five are set to follow imminently. This will make it virtually impossible to access an abortion in Southern and Midwestern states. As it stands, 58% of women of child bearing age (about 40 million) now live in abortion hostile states.

This is clearly an awful attack on the rights of women that should be unequivocally fought at every turn. But

as socialist feminists we should also be very clear that Roe v Wade was never a good enough.

As a piece of legislation it never guaranteed all women access to abortion – the opportunity for attacks on abortion rights were woven into the very fabric of the law itself. Roe v Wade was never prepared to deal with medical advances. In fact, Mississippi first introduced its law banning abortion after 15 weeks on the grounds that a foetus has made important physiological developments by 15 weeks.

On top of this, the ‘undue burden’ clause in Roe was extremely open to interpretation. For decades a key strategy of the anti-choice right has been to exploit and stress test this weakness. This allowed them to lay the foundations of a two-tier abortion system, which will now be supercharged by the overturning of Roe. Even with Roe v Wade in place, conservative states have been allowed to cut all state funding for abortions, introduce waiting periods and demand women obtain spousal and/or parental consent before having the procedure.

This left women in the sometimes impossible situation of having to raise the funds to pay for the procedure, travel (sometimes hundreds of miles) to the nearest clinic and pay for accommodation - all within the small window where the abortion was legal. The shift towards fully ratifying the two-tier system has been decades in the making. Conservatives realised early that they could galvanise Catholic and Evangelical minorities around anti-choice politics. The percentage of the USA reporting no religion has increased from 7% in Reagan’s 1980 to 21% in 2021; the number of Catholics decreased from 28% to 22%; and the number of Evangelical white Protestants declined from 21% in 2003 to 13% in 2017. Yet organising efforts have supercharged the political force of the conservative Christian right both as a street movement and a formidable voter bloc. This has allowed them to gerrymander the legislatures and pack

the judiciary, rustling in a minority rule over the United States.

This tactic was by no means the brainchild of Donald Trump, but his administration was the most successful at it. Mitch McConnell, Senate majority leader for Trump, engaged in court packing with the single minded focus of a bureaucratic terminator — only instead of coming from the future, he seems to have been sent directly from 1692. His aim was simple: “to do everything we can, for as long as we can, to transform the federal judiciary, because everything else we do is transitory.”

There are a total of 816 active federal judges in the Supreme Court, the 13 appellate courts, and 91 district courts. In just one term Trump was able to appoint 28% of those judges. He appointed 33% of America’s nine supreme court justices, and 30% of the courts-of-appeal judges. He also appointed them young, very young by normal standards. Of the 47 appeal-court judges he appointed in four years, six were in their 30s and twenty were under 45. Obama appointed 55 judges in eight years and only six were below the age of 45, none were in their 30s. This is significant because there is no limit on how long a judge can sit for, they either decide to retire (often at a politically strategic time) or they die.

The one glimmer of hope in this whole sorry affair is this: the judiciary and legislators are considerably to the right of the population on this issue. Roe v Wade is actually very popular, in 2020 opinion polls put its approval rating at 70%. The most recent polling has shown the vast majority of Americans (85%), from right across the political spectrum support some kind of safe and legal abortion for women. The complete abolition of abortion is very much a minority agenda, albeit one carried out extremely successfully by the lunatic fringes.

While understanding the tactics by which Roe was overturned is important, socialist feminists shouldn’t fall into the trap of viewing June’s events as a momentary blip where democracy has failed. If anything, the limited gains of Roe v Wade were the blip. For as long

as capitalism governs our lives and freedoms and pits workers against each other, our bodies will always be contested ground. They will forever be reduced to a mere terrain that reactionaries and the ruling class seek to conquer and control.

It is true that the Supreme Court’s decision is at odds with the current trend of liberalising abortion laws we see in much of the western world. However, globally the right is on the ascent and gains made through struggle can always be reversed. The bourgeois class and its deformed, extreme religious-right offspring have a vested interest in controlling our bodies because we reproduce the labour force. They create the system we are governed by and that system is stacked against us, no amount of tinkering around the edges will change that. We must resist the urge to anchor our pro-choice politics to shallow electoral tactics.

In the short term I think the overturning of Roe will usher in a wave of incredible grassroots solidarity across the US; some of which we’re already seeing. People will donate money, time, transport and their homes to assist women who need to cross state lines to obtain an abortion. We may even see pro-choice states directing funds

towards helping women cross the border. This work is not just right because it will save lives, it’s also a critical part of delegitimising abortion bans. But alone it’s not enough. Americans will also need to build a large, sustainable and organised protest movement that unapologetically demands all women have the right to an abortion wherever and whenever. International feminists should find ways to offer as much practical solidarity to our American comrades as possible.

Short of a genuinely revolutionary upheaval, the best hope American’s have of undoing this ruling now lies with the introduction of a federal law. However, there aren’t the pro-choice numbers in the Senate to stop a federal statute being blocked. The Democrats are using the overturning of Roe V Wade as a campaigning point for the midterm elections but have already proven themselves mealy-mouthed and unwilling to deliver even a rudimentary defence in the face of this right-wing onslaught - let alone the radical change needed.

In the longer term I hope this sparks a struggle for genuine, grass-roots democracy in the United States that is capable of transforming the Judiciary and legislature.





While reproductive rights have been rolled back in the US, in Latin America the feminist movement is on the offensive and has won significant gains. Abortion was decriminalised in Argentina in 2020. Colombia and Mexico have since followed suit, meaning three of the four most populous countries in Latin America have decriminalised the procedure. The rejection of Chile's 'feminist' constitution in the referendum in early September means that the fate of abortion legislation there is less clear, but it's unlikely that either the Boric government or the Chilean feminist movement will let the issue lie.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

AS LATE AS NECESSARY

In an earlier edition of Women's Fightback (March 2020) we published an article, 'As early as possible, as late as necessary', by Ruth Cashman (bit.ly/late-as-necessary), which called for the abolition of abortion term limits. In the context of the overturning of Roe v Wade, it's worth considering again. When we struggle for reproductive justice, what are we struggling for?

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 must also 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 5 weeks and at 7 weeks – before and after the US "heartbeat bill" cut-offs. Most of those pushing for greater 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 more dangerous: this is why we want to ensure women can access abortion as early as possible. Foetal viability may become relevant at the point we offer operations to transplant foetuses 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 own 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. To do so is a basic and unjustifiable affront to bodily autonomy. We need abortion as early as possible and as late as necessary.

BERLIN'S 'THIRD SEX'

LGBT+ HISTORY

MAGNUS HIRSCHFELD AND THE FIRST LGBT RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) was the founder of the Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin, a pioneer in the field of sexology and an outspoken advocate for the rights of sexual minorities. Gay, feminist, socialist and Jewish, he was anathema to the Nazis, and it's no coincidence that on 6 May 1933, a bust of Hirschfeld was thrown onto the fire along with his extensive library and archives, at the one of the first and largest of the Nazi book burnings. Hirschfeld was a key figure in the vibrant world of Berlin in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Most people, including modern-day Berliners, would likely place the birth of modern LGBT movements in the 1960s, most famously with the Stonewall Riots in New York. But, in fact, 60 years prior to that, there was a fully-fledged, assertive gay and queer movement in Berlin, incorporating a flourishing drag scene, gay and lesbian nightlife and a

burgeoning trans community. By the interwar period the movement was big and making considerable progress, until it was cut short by the Nazi seizure of power. Neglected and often forgotten, it's important that we dust off this particular piece of history, and give it the spotlight it deserves.

POLICING THE 'THIRD SEX'

The French Revolution of 1789 established the principle of consensual sexual relations being private and outside of the remit of state control, and revolutionary France chose not to include an anti-sodomy statute in its 1791 criminal code. This was a shift that influenced other parts of Europe. Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and most Italian states followed suit and decriminalised sodomy. Germany, on the other hand, was patchy in the run up to the Franco-Prussian War, with some states exempting homosexuality from criminal prosecution, while others

maintained anti-sodomy statutes in their criminal code. Prussia was of the latter type, and had a significant influence over the post-war legal settlement. After 1871, German unification brought the entirety of the new territory under an anti-sodomy statute, Paragraph 175. As such, Germany was a comparatively restrictive, hostile environment for gay and gender non-conforming individuals, and an unlikely candidate for the home of a burgeoning LGBT scene.

Despite its restrictive legislation, however, Berlin was marked by a remarkably liberal policing policy in this period. Berlin police commissioner Leopold von Meerscheidt-Hüllessem adopted a policy of tolerating and surveilling homosexual bars. The idea was that instead of pushing homosexual activity underground in a rapidly expanding metropolis, it was better to keep it out in the open where it could be monitored. Even so, the policy was striking. Hüllessem would give tours of the city's homosexual nightspots and entertainments, such as the grand gay and lesbian costume balls that marked the era. Psychologists, journalists and authors were escorted on these tours as his guest, and Berlin came to serve

KELLY ROGERS

Costume party at the Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin. Magnus Hirschfeld (in glasses) holds hands with his partner, Karl Giese.



as a kind of laboratory of sexuality. This raised the profile of Berlin's homosexual and gender-nonconfirming milieu, which was studied and reported on openly, leading to a flurry of curious tourists descending on Berlin to experience the scene for themselves. But, most importantly, it fostered a (relatively) safe environment in which same-sex bars and clubs could multiply and thrive, nurturing Berlin's rapidly growing 'third sex' community. Between 1885 and the Nazi era, there were, as far as we know, no police raids on a gay or lesbian bar.

In fact, during this period the main concern was not homosexual activity itself, but associated criminal activity: blackmail and prostitution. Berlin became known for its easy access to male sex workers. In his 1904 essay, *Berlin's Third Sex*, Hirschfeld speaks at length about the threat of blackmail by desperate sex workers or vengeful acquaintances. Rumours about homosexual individuals became fodder for Berlin's newspapers. Significant criminal trials, and trials-by-public-opinion, led to a not insignificant number of suicides. According to Hirschfeld, nearly 30 percent of Berlin's gay community in 1904 had experienced blackmail. Indeed, blackmail was a profoundly leveling force, used against the rich and powerful as well as the poor, and preventing blackmail was one of the key motivations for growing centrist and right-wing support for the repeal of Paragraph 175 in the years that followed.

THE LEFT

Hirschfeld set up the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (SHC) in 1897, the world's first organisation advocating for the rights of sexual minorities. Its motto "through science to justice", encapsulated its approach, which brought together scientific research with public campaigning. The aim was to spread the idea that sexual orientation and gender identity (his term 'third sex' encapsulated both) was an in-born trait and ought not be persecuted. This was, of course, revolutionary at the time, cutting against the belief that homosexuality and gender non-conformity were pathological, or worse, a moral scourge. Hirschfeld and the SHC produced rafts of pamphlets

for distribution, which they sent to thousands of public officials, leading academics, psychologists, scientists, and so on, in a bid to get them onboard with the campaign and to sign up as signatories to his petition for the repeal of Paragraph 175. He held public lectures for working-class people as well, initially in breweries that could hold hundreds of audience members at a time, and later in the lecture hall at his Institute for Sexual Research.

Hirschfeld was a member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and won the support of SPD leader August Bebel, who introduced a measure to overturn the anti-sodomy statute in 1898, triggering a full debate on the floor of the Reichstag. The initiative failed, but marked the beginning of support from the left and socialists for Hirschfeld's campaign. The petition against the sodomy laws was also signed by Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, among other leading figures of the time. Many LGBT people in Berlin joined the SPD, and it became a political home for many interested in advancing the cause of 'third sex' rights, just as the ranks of Hirschfeld's SHC were populated by SPD members.

The other significant left political force in the LGBT movement of the time was anarchism, typically of the individualist type influenced by the works of Max Stirner. This current had many more activists claiming to be heterosexual, marking it out from the others. Rather than advocating for rights on the basis of 'third sex' qualities being in-born, they were for individual freedom and liberty, and the freedom of sexual expression was part-and-parcel of that. As such, the anarchist wing came into conflict with Hirschfeld's biological determinism, in a way that we surely identify with now: they were for sexual freedom regardless of whether an individual's homosexuality was innate or learned.

THE RISE OF THE RIGHT

This was an era in which antisemitism was transforming from age-old prejudice into a modern political force, and the growing homosexual community developed currents that crossed the political spectrum,

including proto-fascist, antisemitic, and nationalist sections. Initially this was a movement that grew under the ideological leadership of Adolf Brand and Hans Blüher. Brand, who took part in Hirschfeld's SHC at first, but split to form the literary society *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* (Community of the Special) in 1903, sought the proliferation of male homoerotic relationships or "friend-love", distinct from homosexuality. Blüher developed a more fleshed-out perspective around the idea of the *Mannerbund*, a "truly German", hyper-virile masculine identity, formed through homoerotic activity. Both Brand and Blüher's perspectives directly challenged Hirschfeld's view of homosexuality and gender non-conformity as in-born, and they rejected 'effeminate' gay men. They saw this side of the gay community as emasculating and diminishing of German culture. Up to a point, this was straightforward misogyny: women were relegated to the role of reproduction and family, while 'culture' was the domain of men, and 'manly' ones at that. But as time went on, these ideological currents leant more heavily on nationalism and antisemitism as well. The feminine, 'emasculatory' homosexual identity was seen to be a Jewish affectation, promoted by Hirschfeld, who was Jewish, and others in the SHC.

The mass appeal of this right-wing ideology can be seen in the emergence of the *Bund für Menschenrecht* (Human Rights League) in 1923, led by Freidrick Radszuwiet. The League was a cross-political organisation: a 'pragmatic' organisation for reform that numbered more than 100,000 members at its height. In a poll of 38,000 members, conducted in 1926, 16,000 were members of Communist and Socialist Parties, 3,000 belonged to the Catholic Centre Party, and 12,000 were members of the volkisch right wing.

HIRSCHFELD'S INSTITUTE AND THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The Weimar period saw a flourishing of homosexual periodicals and literature, film and theatre, same-sex clubs and bars, and much more. 1919 was also when Hirschfeld established his *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Research). The



Members of the Nazi Party and Hitler Youth burn the books and archives from Hirschfeld's Institute at Opernplatz, May 6 1933.

Institute became a hub of research and study, a museum of sexology, a library and refuge. He hired Ludwig Levy-Lenz, a gynecologist, and Erwin Gohrband, a surgeon, and together they performed the first sex reassignment surgeries, *Genitalumwandlung* (literally, "transformation of genitals"). The Institute also developed the first hormone therapies. In order to fund these activities, Hirschfeld offered counselling and therapy for the 'third sex' community, and to heterosexual individuals and couples willing to pay a fee.

The Institute had considerable links with Berlin's feminist movement. Hirschfeld had joined forces with left-wing feminist Helene Stöcker, and supported the founding of *Bund für Mutterschutz* (the League for the Protection of Mothers) in 1905, which organised for women's suffrage, popular access to birth control, and abortion rights. By 1919 Hirschfeld and Stöcker

together were spearheading the sexual reform movement of the Weimar Republic, which made significant gains. The Social Democratic government was broadly supportive of most feminist causes and introduced women's suffrage in late 1918. Women also enjoyed the support of the newly formed Communist Party of Germany (KPD), which sought to replicate the reforms adopted by the Soviet Union, including no-fault divorce, the decriminalisation of abortion, easy access to birth control and the elimination of anti-sodomy laws. The campaign for greater freedoms for 'third sex' people continued: Hirschfeld personally negotiated the commissioning of 'transvestite passes' by police, for instance, which allowed people to be out in public and avoid arrest for cross-dressing.

COLLAPSE

In October 1929, a Reichstag committee voted fifteen to thirteen to eliminate

Paragraph 175, a groundbreaking step forward and the consequence of decades of campaigning. But the tide of history turned against Hirschfeld and Berlin's LGBT community. The collapse of the government in March 1930 prevented parliamentary action, and the campaign in general was derailed by the change in political situation. The Nazis began their rise in earnest, increasing their parliamentary bloc from 12 in 1928 to 107 in 1930; 230 and 196 in two elections of 1932; and then 288 in 1933. There were pitched battles in the streets between right-paramilitary groups and the left. Violent antisemitic attacks were widespread and the Nazi Party specifically identified Hirschfeld and his Institute in their antisemitic propaganda, declaring them the "Jewish corruption" of Germany. He, and many others working at the Institute had to flee. Hirschfeld would never return to Germany. He died in France two years later, in 1935. Levy-Lenz, who was Jewish like Hirschfeld, also fled, but

Gohrbandt – the surgeon behind the Institute's groundbreaking surgeries – joined the Luftwaffe as chief medical advisor. Later he contributed to experiments in the Dachau concentration camp.

Initially, homosexuals were only targets if they were Jewish or leftists, although Hirschfeld's Institute was looted and destroyed very early on, only three months after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on January 30 1933. It is suspected that one of the reasons it was targeted was because the Institute "knew too much": the Nazi party had homosexuals in its ranks and the Institute was an archive of information on Berlin's homosexual community.

The Nazi's most famous homosexual member was Ernst Röhm, leader of the SA. It's worth noting that, during the rise of Nazi Party, the SPD, along with the KPD, had vocally argued that the Nazis were soft on homosexuals. The SPD newspaper *Münchener Post*, for instance, published a series of front-page stories about alleged homosexuality in the SA in 1931, which turned out to be based on forgeries. Outside limited sections of the party, Social Democratic support for homosexual rights was fair-weather it turned out.

At first, when Röhm was publicly outed, Hitler had defended his right to be homosexual, so long as it didn't come into conflict with his commitment to National Socialism. Later on, of course, Röhm was killed, during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934, and his homosexuality used as the main charge against him. After Röhm's assassination, the Nazis took a more decided turn against the homosexual community, raiding, destroying and shutting down same-sex bars and clubs, arresting known homosexuals, and sending them to concentration camps. A more draconian Paragraph 175 was introduced which allowed for the persecution of a far greater number of homosexual men than ever before. During the Third Reich, more than 100,000 German men were charged under the statute. Of these between an estimated 10,000 and 15,000 perished in prisons and camps.

Following the war, West Germany kept the more draconian Nazi version of Paragraph 175 in place for almost two decades, and the language used in its replacement, drafted in 1962, reverted back to late-nineteenth century thinking. It saw homosexuality not as a natural sexual orientation, but as a pathology and threat to German society. It was only after the surge in New Left activism in the late 1960s that significant steps forward were made, and in 1969 sexual relations between men over the age of 21 were decriminalised. In 1973, the age of consent was lowered to 18. East Germany also criminalised male homosexuality following the war, but stopped prosecuting men over the age of 18 in 1957. In 1968 a new East German criminal code struck off Paragraph 175 completely, and in 1987 East Germany's supreme court ruled that "homosexual persons do not stand outside of socialist society, and are guaranteed the same civil rights as all other citizens".

It was only in 1994, four years after reunification, that Paragraph 175 was finally eliminated entirely from the criminal code of a unified Germany, almost a century after Hirschfeld first established the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee and began his campaign.

IMPERFECT VICTIMS

JANINE BOOTH

She doesn't cringe and cower,
she's not a fragile flower
She picked on him and tricked him
She's not a perfect victim

She tells of his coercion,
he tells a different version
How dare she contradict him?
She's not a perfect victim

She unstable, she's a venter,
she's known to lose her temper
She pushed him and she kicked him
She's not a perfect victim

You never can believe her,
a drama queen, a diva,
recanted when they nicked him
She's not a perfect victim

Our well-established dictum
is stranger than most fiction
Our heroes may be lawless
but victims must be flawless

Drag queens dancing in famous Berlin cabaret club, Eldorado on Motzstraße, c.1926.



SOCIALIST FEMINIST READING GROUP

Live in London? Come along to our monthly socialist feminist reading group in Brixton, hosted by our South West London branch. Each month we have an informal discussion about a book, which might be a new release or a classic from the movement.

Recent books we've read include *Berlin's Third Sex*, by Magnus Hirschfeld; *The Transgender Issue*, by Shon Faye; *The Right to Sex*, by Amia Srinivasan; and *Rape*, by Mithu Sanyal.

For more information write to:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org



THE "TRANSVESTIGATORS"

NATALIA CASSIDY

The wave of reactionary opinion against transgender people in the UK is continuing to intensify. The Tory leadership race was a posturing contest in which the contenders fought over who could be "toughest" on the issue of trans rights. Sunak's pledge to crack down on "woke nonsense" and protect children from "inappropriate material" used language reminiscent of Section 28. Meanwhile, Truss took aim at the Gillick competence of young transgender people, opposing their right to seek out care that makes "irreversible changes to their own bodies".

In amongst this there has been a rise in a small group of online conspiracy theorists calling themselves "transvestigators". Their activity consists of examining photographs of famous people or people they know and analysing them against an extensive set of stereotypes of how they believe men and particularly women should look.

This is certainly a very marginal set of chronically-online, obsessive people who have little in common with the average person holding anti-trans views, but it's worth some analytical attention in terms of where it sits alongside other conspiracy theories. What is

interesting about the transvestigation conspiracy is its focus on Hollywood and those in positions of power. There is a consistent motif that transgender people are hiding in plain sight and pulling the wool over the eyes of those that are being "tricked", so that transgender people in power can exercise their influence unnoticed.

This mode of thinking shows similarities with far right conspiracies about Jewish people: that they secretly run Western governments; that they are pretending to be white when advocating for more liberal immigration policies or anti-racist politics; and that this as an attempt to trick white people into accepting their own so-called "genocide". In each conspiracy, a marginalised group are attributed a great deal of power: seen to be operating secretly, or rather "hiding in plain sight", in order to subvert the wishes of an unknowing majority.

In many ways, this differs from more explicitly far right views on trans people, where Jewish people are seen as orchestrating the feminisation of the "Western Man" and the sterilisation of the "Western Woman" by covertly influencing them to become transgender. Transvestigators, it

seems, share a mode of thought with the antisemitic far right without simply taking their views on trans people verbatim.

Along with the analytical framework that transvestigators seem to operate within, displaying similarities to that of the far right, there is also a great deal of 19th century "scientific" thought that seems to be incorporated into their methodology: an obsession with phrenology and taking precise measurements of pictures of people's skulls, as well as analysing bone structure, gait and all manner of other things to determine whether someone was born into the gender they are outwardly presenting as.

While people like these are currently incredibly marginal, their views and modes of thought can hold sway and influence beyond their own marginal circles. We know, for example, that a number of self-described "gender critical" feminists in Britain have links to far right organisations and individuals. When opposing the far right and making the case for trans people to be able to live with dignity, it is important to be aware of these common modes of logic creeping out of the far right, into more mainstream political currents.

For an overview of links between "gender critical" feminists and the far right see:
bit.ly/gender-critical-feminism-far-right

WOMEN, CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE CRISIS IN SRI LANKA

INTERNATIONAL

NIYANTHINI KADIRGAMAR

Since March 2022, Sri Lanka has been convulsed by protests against collapsing living standards and state authoritarianism, leading in July to the resignation of right-wing nationalist president Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Niyanthini Kadirgamar, a member of Sri Lanka's Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, explains how the current crisis in her country intersects with women's oppression and women's – particularly working-class women's – struggles.

The Feminist Collective for Economic Justice is a network collective of feminist economists, scholars, activists, university students and lawyers,

working in different parts of Sri Lanka, who came together to analyse and make proposals to respond to the current economic crisis. We believe in challenging all forms of oppression and the power structures that perpetuate them. There is a diversity of political positions held within the network though, and some of us are socialists.

The collective was formed because we felt the dominant narratives were not addressing the different ways in which people experience the economic crisis. It impacts everyone, but it's daily paid, waged workers, those in the informal sector, those marginalised on the basis of their ethnicity or sexuality and so on who are suffering most – and

particularly women.

The reality of the Sri Lankan economy is that women are the foreign exchange earners for the country. The three main sectors that bring in the dollars are tea plantations, garment factories in the export processing zones, and domestic migrant labour abroad, sending back remittances. All are dominated by women's labour.

Yet, at the same time women are being forced to bear the brunt of the crisis; when the government failed to provide support to the people, the cost of the crisis was pushed to the household level, and it was women who somehow had to find ways to put food on the



table. This in a context where women's labour, despite its crucial economic role, was already invisibilised and devalued. We felt it was important to make demands on the government that centre this reality and attempt to meaningfully address it.

The changes being proposed to supposedly deal with the crisis in the political mainstream will in many things make the situation worse. Some of the IMF conditionalities that have been put forward for loans include increasing women's labour force participation, but doing so by increasing "flexible" labour – which means forcing women into more exploitative work. We've seen this before – in the late 1970s, as Sri Lanka shifted towards neoliberalism, the government failed to provide decent employment in the countryside and instead pushed women into the export processing zones and abroad, with very low pay and, perhaps even more importantly, very brutal conditions of work.

The Sri Lankan women who go abroad to work are mainly in domestic service and mainly in the Middle East. From time to time the government flirts with curbing this work, for instance by imposing an age limit and limitations on those with families. But many women go abroad either to pay back debt or to save money so they can do something like buying a house or buying land – and because this work is the only option available. A solution that seeks to coerce and limit the options of women workers, rather than providing alternative options to earn more money, is not a solution at all.

Women doing this work face brutal oppression and sometimes violence from their employers, and it is difficult for them to organise collectively, due to the nature of their work environment and where they are. On the plantations and in the export processing zones in Sri Lanka, there are unions that can look into workers' welfare. In the export processing zones, these were established by worker struggles in the 1980s – the Polytex Garments struggle being a significant one – in the very early years of the system. Over the years there have been many struggles.

During the pandemic, many Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East were stuck there, and the government made little effort to get them home, until eventually it came under a lot of pressure.

Similarly, export processing zone workers lost their jobs and had to return home to their villages. More broadly, women who get older and become less productive are often pushed out of their jobs and have to return to the countryside, with very little in the way of government support or decent jobs. The rural economy has been undermined to create a labour pool for factories and the like, creating an even worse situation when people have to return to where they began.

We are demanding recognition of women's labour in the home, a universal social security system – which Sri Lanka does not have currently, only targeted systems – and much stronger labour laws to protect workers' rights.

During the Rajapaksa's previous government, in 2011, workers in the export processing zones protested against changes to the Employees Provident Fund and one worker was killed. It was really very significant, as it was one of the first mass protests to shake the regime, along with protests and strikes by fisherfolk and teachers.

Women have been an important part of the recent wave of protests. As part of the neighbourhood protests there have been 'Kitchen Lament' protests focused on highlighting the struggle in households that the economic crisis has created. Women's groups, including those in our collective and others, have been mobilising people, organising teachouts and so on. Women have also been part of the leadership in many of the organisations active in the protests, although they are not given due recognition at times.

However, when violence is unleashed against a largely democratic and non-violent struggle, the space for women's participation decreases. Women took a larger role in the early stages of the protests, but since the violence in early May it has become more difficult. Abortion is illegal in Sri Lanka unless

the life of the mother is in danger. It's something that is discussed – we know there are about seven hundred abortions every day, despite the law – and that discussion is connected to other discussions about marital rape, sexual harassment and reproductive freedom more broadly. So far, however, there is no major campaign around these issues.

One very positive and significant development is this year that Sri Lanka had its first Pride march, first in Jaffna, a town in the north, and then in Colombo. It was organised by various LGBTIQ+ rights groups but also by the Gota Go Gama protesters from the main occupation site in Colombo. The slogans included the call for the president and prime minister to resign, and also addressed the issue of militarisation in the north and the oppression of the Tamils.

It's only in the last few years that LGBTIQ+ activism has gained more visibility and started to enter mainstream discussions. In 2018 the Rajapaksa-aligned political grouping tried to gain power through a sort of constitutional coup, and the then president made very public derogatory remarks about LGBTIQ+ people. An organisation emerged called Butterflies for Democracy, and this year amidst the crisis they have once again added strength to the protests.

At the Gota Go Gama site I believe there was some push back against the raising of LGBTIQ+ politics and demands, and the Pride march did experience some harassment. But the feeling that there was space to organise a public event which allies could also join was very significant, and it was the context of the democracy protests that made it possible.

For two recent statements from the collective on Sri Lanka's crisis see:

- Urgent plea by Sri Lankan feminists: bit.ly/urgent-plea
- Universal social security: If not now, when?: bit.ly/universal-social-security



Lillian Bilocca

THE HEADSCARF REVOLUTIONARIES AND THE FIGHT FOR SAFETY AT SEA

HISTORY

LUKE HARDY

"I wanted something wrong, put right. People should never put money before people's lives": the words of Yvonne Blenkinsop who died this April. She was one of the "Headscarf Revolutionaries", the working class Hull women who led the campaign for safety on the Trawlers and to save lives at sea.

In the 1960s Hull was one of the biggest and most industrialised fishing ports in the world. The trawlers would be away for weeks fishing in the icy waters of the Arctic and North Atlantic. It was an extremely dangerous industry and it is estimated that from 1886 to 1975 over 6000 trawlermen were lost at sea. Thousands more died in boats sailing from other British ports. The fishing industry was more deadly than mining.

The lack of regard for human life on behalf of the big companies that owned fleets of trawlers was shocking. Wages were stopped the moment a trawlerman was reported lost. The way the trawlermen were paid also incentivised dangerous behaviour. Most of the pay was based on a share of the value of the fish caught, rather than a basic wage. The skipper would get the biggest percentage and then it was shared out amongst the rest of the crew according to seniority. One of the reasons

trawlers would put to sea without Radio Operators is because skippers would see them as cutting into the percentage without helping land more fish. This also meant there was an incentive to keep fishing in the most terrible conditions, instead of turning for home or a safe harbour. This model, and the hostility of the skippers and owners, had kept unionisation weak on the Hull fish dock. Rather than being organised into the National Union of Seamen like the cargo and passenger ships in the port, the trawlermen were in the TGWU, which did not want to push measures that might reduce the share of the catch that crew members got.

Yvonne Blenkinsop's father had died of a heart attack on a trawler when she was 16. Many of the families who lived around Hessle Road, the heart of the fishing community, had known similar losses over the years. It was a community that had developed a particular culture. The trawler men were usually home for only three days and away at sea for up to three weeks.

My mother, from a working class background and going out with my father, a trawlerman, still felt very much an outsider in this culture that seemed old-fashioned, restrictive and

conservative even for the time. The name "Headscarf Revolutionaries" arose because so many of the women still wore headscarves when out of the house. But out of necessity there had grown strong social networks of solidarity amongst the women whose husbands, sons and fathers were out on the trawlers, and this existing culture within the community allowed many women to be quickly galvanised into action when a set of tragedies unfolded in January and February 1968.

On 24 January it was reported that the *St Romanus* was thought lost at sea with all twenty men aboard. The trawler owners had known of the probable loss since 13 January but had delayed raising the alarm for a whole ten days. The ship had a bad reputation for seaworthiness amongst the crews and had been put to sea without a radio operator. A few days later the *Kingston Peridot* was reported missing. Again, another twenty lives lost.

A group of women, led by Lillian Bilocca, began going door-to-door and shop-to-shop around the Hessle Road area with a petition for safety at sea. In a few days they had 10,000 signatures. They called a meeting of women at the Victoria Hall on the 2nd of February.

Here they voted to found the Hessle Road Women's committee, headed up by Bilocca, Blenkinsop, Mary Denness and Christine Jensen, and tasked with pressing their demands with the owners and the government. Their demands included radio operators on all boats; ensuring all trawlers were fully equipped with safety equipment; and safety ships to sail with the fleet to provide medical support, monitor conditions and come to the aid of ships in trouble.

For all of them this was the first political campaign they had ever been involved in. Although they had some support from the National Union of Seaman, many trawler men and the TGWU were hostile. Yvonne was punched in the face by a man for the temerity of getting involved.

On the 3rd of February, two hundred women marched down to the dock demanding to meet the owners. It's at this point that the national media began to pay attention, and there's a great clip of Blenkinsop forcefully hectoring the TV journalist with their demands. He can't get a word in edgeways. Rather than accepting the changes, the spokesman from the Trawler Owners Association accused the women of being subject to mass hysteria and sticking their nose into business women couldn't understand.

The campaign then turned to direct action, with the women going down to the dock gates to try to stop trawlers leaving port without a radio operator. Bilocca was held back by half a dozen

police from jumping aboard a trawler that was about to go to sea. The next day the news came out of a third Hull trawler lost in the space of a few weeks. This time the Ross Cleveland, with only one survivor. 58 men had lost their lives in a few short weeks.

Yvonne went down as part of a delegation to Westminster to put the now expanded demands, called "The Fisherman's Charter", to government ministers. Blenkinsop told the Fisheries Minister, Fred Peart, that they were not going to leave until all of the demands had been enacted. The government agreed to immediately implement 88 new regulations on trawler safety. In the longer term, the enquiry into the Triple Trawler Tragedy led to even more. When the women got back to Hull, Mary Denness said to the press they had achieved more for safety at sea in ten days than politicians and the trade unions had in a hundred years.

Countless lives were saved by these women, and yet at the time they simply went back to their lives and were for a long time forgotten. The Hull fishing industry went into precipitous decline in the mid-1970s and the community it sustained went with it. It's only recently that this story has been brought back to people's consciousness by books, documentaries, plays and murals and plaques around Hull. Unlike some of her comrades Blenkinsop lived to see this happen, and, fortunately, was able to tell her own story of this victory by the working class women of Hull.

FEMINIST CITIES

Rebecca Lawrence reviews:

- *Feminist City, Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (2021), by Leslie Kern
- *Found Cities, Lost Objects: Women in the City*, exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, May-September 2022.
- *Making Space* (1984), by feminist collective Matrix.

How does the man-made built environment impact women and how we live? How does the design of our homes and cities affect not only our safety, but our happiness, convenience, and the very structure of our lives? Feminists can gain some insight on this topic from Leslie Kern's book, *Feminist City* and Birmingham's *Women in the City* exhibition.

Feminist City serves well as an excellent introductory text. It's a very accessible look into feminist geography, written from an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, LGBTQ-inclusive position. Kern does well to highlight the difficulties women face when simply existing when pregnant or a mother. From finding suitable toilets, to breastfeeding, to just getting from A to B: "Every aspect of public transit reminded me that I wasn't the ideal imagined user. Stairs, revolving doors, turnstiles, no space for strollers, broken elevators and escalators, rude comments, glares: all of these told me the city wasn't designed with parents and children in mind."

Kern appropriately puts these issues in the context of the inadequate provision of childcare, and 'double-shifts' of paid and unpaid work that women are so often burdened with. Kern notes in the chapter 'City of Friends': "The power of female friendship is typically either underestimated, undermined, or ignored all together in cultural narratives." The exploration of how this plays out within

...continues on next page

Yvonne Blenkinsop (second from right)



the city for women and girls, how they interact with space, support each other, explore, form identities, and take up space or are discouraged from doing so, is an interesting section. In the chapter covering protest, she makes clear how important taking to the streets is, whilst honestly grappling with the difficulties in participation women can experience too.

There is a pertinent reminder here for trade unionists, as strike action is on the rise. Kern describes her participation in a three-month strike, and how quickly people's strike roles fell into gendered divisions of labour before they realised it: "...male colleagues were channelling an inner 'man of the woods' chopping down trees for the fire barrels.... Meanwhile, women and queer folk were quietly taking on the emotional and domestic labour."

Overall, Kern's book - though perhaps light on details, answers or solutions for regular readers of feminist work or activists - is an important contribution to push us to analyse the built environment more, as she proposes: "It's clear that the time has come to decentre the heterosexual, nuclear family in everything from housing design to transportation strategies, neighbourhood planning to urban zoning."

As I continued to think about the built environment, I was excited to hear of

the exhibition *Found Cities, Lost Objects: Women in the City*, at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. It was an inspirational visit. The exhibition is as much about joy, and exploration as it is about struggles and challenges. There are over sixty pieces on display, across a wide range of mediums including paintings, photographs, sculptures, objects and videos. There are several displays which explore maps and navigation, including Phyllis Pearsall the founder of the A to Z maps (for those who grew up with Sat Navs, there used to be a scruffy, dog-eared copy of an A to Z book in pretty much every car!) Incredibly, Pearsall walked over 3,000 miles in her mapping endeavours.

Melanie Manchot's joyful work, *Dance*, filmed dance students moving through the streets, taking over and using public spaces freely and expressively. I found the result captivating.

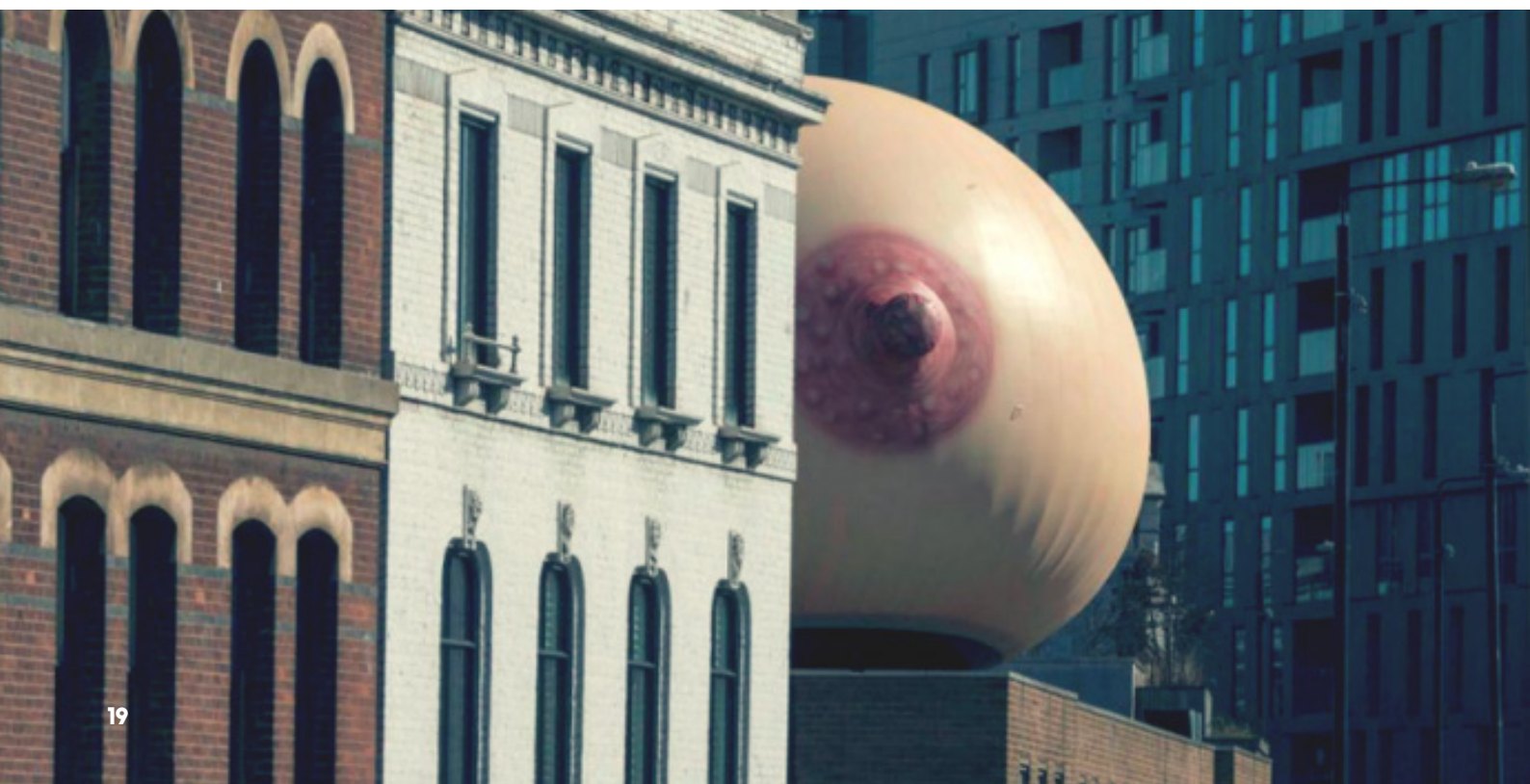
Lucy McLauchlan's work *Expressive Deviant Phonology* uses its own separate room for an immersive audio-visual display using footage of women's eyes being projected onto large scale buildings, including during the demolition of the old Birmingham Library, seeking to analyse the male gaze. I found it provoking: the abstract nature of the forms used brought to the fore the absurd nature of what we are sometimes forced to tolerate from men in the form of comments, catcalls and aggressive behaviour whilst going

about our day. It can be as banal and exhausting as it can be frightening.

A final pleasing reflection was that the exhibition fills the Gas Hall section of the museum. Large parts of the museum are currently closed for electrical upgrading work, and so *Women in the City* is given significant space, occupying the largest part of the open museum. This feels wonderfully symbolic as part of a wider conversation about the historic marginalisation of women in the public sphere.

One display at the museum, *Matrix*, led me to another book on this topic: *Making Space*, by Matrix. Matrix was a UK-based feminist collective of architects, builders, and women in a range of other professions, who, starting in the 1980s, worked against sexist assumptions embodied in the man-made environment. Originally released in 1984, *Making Space* was re-released this year by Verso and this book is a hugely insightful read, more so than Kern's.

This short book offers an enormous amount of valuable analysis. This includes the scrutiny of architecture as a male-dominated field, and all the barriers, big and small, to women students and practitioners within it. There is an astute argument that architects are often far-removed from any of the users of buildings.





The book uses history to provide greater understanding, including a look at the influence of women from the labour movement on the Women's Housing Sub-Committee in the early twentieth century. The committee did considerable research on working-class housing, looking at ways to make the home more bearable and convenient for women and their families. They also explored co-operative or communal designs and models of housekeeping (though not especially popular among working-class women at that time).

There is an enlightening history of British Restaurants, set up during the Second World War. During today's rising foodbank use and the spiralling cost of living crisis, it seems remarkable that community feeding was once a settled part of government policy. In the 1940s, British Restaurants were non-profit and run by local authorities, to be affordable and provide 'well-balanced, nourishing meals in places convenient for people to eat in'. By 1943 there were 2,000 British Restaurants, increasing at a rate of ten per week and approximately 180 million meals per week were provided by British Restaurants and industrial canteens, about ten percent of civilian food supplies. The Labour Party included a commitment to continue these in its 1945 manifesto. Despite this, they were mostly gone by the 1950s.

Making Space also discusses how different rooms in the home came to be designed in certain ways, and how this reflected wider societal changes over time. The authors look at not only homes, but the spaces between homes, separations between urban and suburban, footpaths, roads and how planning was influenced by perceptions of women and where they 'should' be. There is also a chapter in which those involved in the Matrix projects reflect on their working, which for feminists embarking on any similar projects would likely find helpful reading.

These books and artworks have sparked more thoughts on reassessing our physical environment. As written in *Making Space*: "It is a process of unravelling all the ways we are conditioned to think about the places around us, and then creating our own ways.... If we can become more aware of how the buildings we live and work in relate to how we live, then we can create buildings that work with women's struggle for liberation rather than against it."

REVIEW

THE RIGHT TO SEX

Andi Brookes reviews *The Right to Sex* (2021), by Amia Srinivasan

When does disappointing sex turn into sexual assault? Is it ever right for teachers to sleep with their students? Should kids be exposed to "age-appropriate" porn? Does anyone have an inalienable right to sex, no matter how horrid they are? When was the last time you thought about the influence the global capitalist patriarchy has on your sex life?

It's not often we confront our desires through a political lens in the 2020s. Most modern discourse on sex

adopts either a positive, girl-boss empowerment approach to sexual encounters or takes an oppositional prudish stance. Neither of these perspectives reflect the realities of sexual politics today, and to continue the pretence that we live in a post-Cosmopolitan world consisting solely of de-politicised bodily autonomy and enthusiastic consent, in an era of anti-trans panic and the rolling back of abortion rights, seems futile. *The Right to Sex*, a collection of essays by Amia Srinivasan, deliberately attempts to bring the political lens back to this corner of the discourse, delving into the awkward, messy and sometimes

infuriating world of our sex lives under capitalism and the patriarchy.

Bringing historical feminist debates out of the archives and dusting them off for another generation, the essays touch on a range of different areas, from the impact of carceral approaches to sexual assault, to the factors at work around teacher-student relationships. It's a useful exercise in feminist analysis to trace the roots of current thinking back to debates litigated in the 1960s and '70s, although it might have been interesting to dive further back still. There is also significant critique of the carceral approach that mainstream feminism has tended to rely on to deliver justice, a theme that crops up several times throughout the essays. Srinivasan places the racial and class hierarchies in capitalist society centre-stage, and this reliance on carceral solutions goes about as well as you might expect on each occasion, with men of colour, queer porn producers, and immigrants caught in the crossfire.

Parts make for uncomfortable reading. In the titular 'Right to Sex' - the stand out essay of the collection - Srinivasan poses the provocative question of whether everyone should have access to sex and intimacy, regardless of other characteristics. The debate is situated against the backdrop of violence driven by white males identifying as "involuntary celebrities" or incels, embodying the very worst of patriarchal sexual entitlement, spilling over into unbound offline rage. It's actually quite sad then, when the essay explains that the original "incel" website was set up by a lonely queer Canadian looking for connection and community. The chapter goes on to challenge the reader to think about who they find sexually attractive and why, making us explore the ways in which our sexualities have been shaped by the bigotries and prejudices of wider society.

Are men the enemy, or is it the patriarchal capitalist system? Should we be stridently rejecting sex with men as a manifestation of patriarchy or does this deny us our own agency and control of our sex lives? What does it even mean to desire and be desired, particularly if you identify as a heterosexual women?

This topic is one that could form the basis of an entire book itself, so it's a bit disappointing that the book loses some steam from this high point. A long, disjointed series of paragraphs follows, addressing criticisms of the 'Right to Sex' essay following its initial publication in 2018. While the points raised do add to the commentary, the fact that they've clearly been taken from social media means that the whole thing feels like a very long Twitter thread.

The book joins Mithu Sanyal's *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* in critiquing and re-examining society's perceptions of sex and relationships and attempting to find nuance in topics that are often

presented as superficially black and white in today's media. Reminding ourselves that our bodies and our desires remain political and a site of struggle feels like a sigh of relief, after several decades of insistence that all our problems could be solved with readily available contraception and clear consent. Those searching for answers in *The Right to Sex* might be disappointed though, since few of the essays come down in a firm stance in their conclusions or contain much in the way of concrete recommendations, which can be frustrating if you're looking for the road to true sexual liberation. Except that it is definitely not okay to sleep with your students, in case that was unclear.

INTERNATIONAL

DELHI'S EARLY YEARS WORKERS RISE UP

Between 31 January and 9 March many thousands of workers in the "anganwadi" early years childcare system of the Indian capital Delhi struck for higher pay, to be recognised as full public employees and other demands. In March their strike was declared illegal; hundreds of workers have now been sacked and thousands threatened with disciplinary action. The Delhi State Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union has since organised a wave of protests, and says it will be restarting the strike.

There have also been struggles by anganwadi workers in many other parts of India. At the end of July workers from across the country, mobilised by the more bureaucratic CITU union federation mentioned below, held four days of protests in Delhi to demand improvements.

In April, we spoke to DSAWHU president Shivani Kaul.

In India we have a state-run early years childcare system that exists across the country. It provides not only

childcare but support and education around breast-feeding, nutrition and contraception, supplementary nutrition services and other services for women. That is the industry we organise in Delhi.

I myself am also part of Mazdoor Bigul (Workers' Bugle), a Marxist-Leninist group [Women's Fightback would criticise it as Stalinist] that is very active in trade unions and the industrial labour movement, in a range of sectors.

In India there is a tendency for unions to be part of a central federation linked to a particular political party. We have unions associated with the so-called Communist Parties, with Congress, even with the fascist BJP. DSAWHU is an independent union, not controlled by any party. My political organisation was associated with the union from its beginning in 2015, we helped build it up, but it is a genuinely independent union.

In 2015 there was a largely spontaneous agitation by these workers against the government of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, and a comrade of mine



encountered it by chance and developed links. That is how I became involved. Until then the only union was one that is part of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions [CITU], run by the [reformist] Communist Party of India (Marxist). This union still exists on paper, with official registration, but it has very little base in Delhi. Its capitulationism made it unpopular among the workers and so in 2015 they organised themselves independently.

There was a 28 day strike and that is when the DSAWHU came into being. They won a partial victory, forcing the government to negotiate and accept some demands – but the major demands were not won. However, the workers' self-organisation was itself a great victory.

Our 2022 strike attracted a lot of attention, even across the world. We received solidarity from Nepal, from Australia, from the US, from you in the UK. Most importantly, we had workers and trade unionists in many other parts of India get in touch. There is widespread disillusionment with the kind of trade union politics dominant in most places. We have had talks with and invitations from other anganwadi women workers, in other parts of the country, who are trying to build new, independent trade unions. We want to build an all-India organisation that

can weave these struggles in the anganwadi sector together. The existing national federations are all part of the bureaucratic union centres.

This year's strike in Delhi started on 31 January and went on for 38 days. During it we had a series of huge rallies. On International Women's Day we had what I think was probably the biggest march anywhere in the world, with many, many thousands of women workers.

The strike won new victories. The growth in workers' organisation and consciousness was itself a great victory. The main economic victory, reflecting the huge pressure the Delhi government was put under, was an increase in honoraria. (These workers do not get salaries, they get honoraria, because they are treated as voluntary social workers.)

They are not treated as proper workers, even though they are engaged in one of the most important areas of work in any capitalist economy, the reproduction of labour power, the raising of a new generation. This refusal to recognise them as workers is a scandal that the national and state governments have been colluding in since the system was established in 1975. The strike's main demand, in addition to increased pay, was for the women to be recognised fully as workers, with the recognition as

well as benefits this involves.

These women are part of the working class, and they are providing services to the mothers and children of the working class; and it is being done on the cheap. It is a real scam. Many of the women providing and using these services, certainly in Delhi, are dalits [from the lowest caste], many are Muslims. They face special oppression and are also particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Moreover, there are two categories of workers - "workers" and "helpers", the latter being treated as unskilled. The "workers" have responsibility for teaching the children, running pre-school education, as well as immunisation services and other projects. The "helpers" are mainly responsible for feeding the kids and sometimes picking them up from their homes. "Workers" need more educational qualifications, and in fact this has recently been tightened up: they are now required to have a degree. Our union organises both groups, as the name says.

In many parts of India, certainly Delhi and some of the states where the dalit population is very large – Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra – the "helpers" are more likely to be dalits.

This kind of division among workers is deliberately created by capitalists and by the state, to divide workers – not just in the anganwadi sector, but many others, for instance the automobile industry, and of course not only in India. The technical differences are often quite small and could be easily overcome with more training, but the categories are deliberately created and maintained to divide workers. Even among anganwadi workers, some “workers” see themselves as superior to the “helpers” or more skilled.

Since our union was founded in 2015, we have undertaken political education and a lot of consciousness-raising has gone on. Previously many of these women did not refer to themselves as workers – “mazdoor”. Other trade unions engage in economic struggles, usually for slightly higher wages. But the central work that needs to be done in trade unions is political education. We run a fortnightly union school, and we make a point of taking up all the current issues affecting workers.

DSAWHU was able to make a significant contribution during the CAA-NRC struggle of 2019-2020 [Citizenship Amendment Act-National Register of Citizens: when the BJP government changed citizenship laws to try to exclude more Muslims]. Many unions are not willing to tackle such issues, but we did not stand aside. We went to Shaheen Bagh, which was the centre of that struggle. Delhi was the centre of this movement, and it also saw fascist Hindu rioters attack it [in February-March 2020].

We have organised many other political campaigns. That has helped develop political education; many of the women are now involved in campaigning and some are socialists. It has strengthened our work in organising and strikes too.

In the anganwadi sector we can see how capitalism and patriarchy work hand-in-hand. In India hardly any men would be interested in doing this work. So when it is referred to as a “social service”, it is an example of how women’s labour is lauded but devalued in this society.

Unlike in Delhi, in all other states there are multiple unions in the sector, and usually they do not work together. In Haryana, where there were anganwadi workers’ protests recently, there are four unions, two of which were involved and two of which were not. Three of the four are associated with electoral parties – one of them with the BJP! So these actions were very patchy and it was hard for them to gain momentum; and it was not really a strike in the same way as Delhi, more a series of protests.

Similar agitation has been taking place in a number of other states, including the very large states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Since the Modi government came to power in 2014, there has been a great deal of ferment in the sector.

The BJP wants to privatise the anganwadi system. They won’t do it all in one go. They have reduced funding, talked constantly about the system running at a loss, and now they want to introduce NGOs, some of which are actually fronts for big capitalist houses. This is connected to a wider drive for privatisation in the education system.

Since 2015 the Delhi state government has been in the hands of the Aam Admi [Common Man] Party [AAP]. I would call it a right-wing populist party. Its main base is small and medium businesspeople, though it certainly has support among sections of the working class. Its leaders, Arvind Kejriwal and his deputy Manish Sisodia, were prominent in NGO politics; they utilised the wave of anti-corruption protests in 2011 to enter electoral politics. Their party also received funding from NGOs internationally.

The AAP talks about alternative politics, about progressiveness, and so on, but it is fundamentally no better than the BJP. Take their stances on article 370 [of the Indian constitution, guaranteeing the autonomy of Kashmir, revoked in 2019], or the Citizenship Amendment Act, or the Ram temple [being built in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, on the site of a historical mosque destroyed by a Hindu fascist mob]. Kejriwal and the AAP are quite happy to appeal to a Hindu identity; in Punjab [where they just won

the state elections for the first time] they attacked Congress for not fielding a Hindu chief minister candidate, saying it is anti-Hindu – even though they didn’t either! The mandate they have won there is more anti-Congress than anything else.

In Delhi their government does not provide decent public services or nationalise anything, but sets up charitable fake services and introduces subsidies whose cost eventually fall on the back of common people. The AAP, the BJP and also Congress are in an unholy alliance against the working class, including against the Delhi anganwadi workers’ struggle.

To explain how things unfolded, I must explain that Delhi is not a proper state but a half-state. There is the state government but also a Lieutenant Governor appointed by the national government. They engage in conflict with each other about inconsequential issues, to gain political and electoral advantage, but when it comes to confronting the working class they work together.

In March they worked together to declare the strike illegal through the Essential Services Maintenance Act. That showed their desperation – up until then they had been unable to undermine the strike.

Our union executive decided that, as a political trade union, we should use this opportunity to expose the judicial system in the eyes of the working class. If the judiciary of this country is genuinely independent, impartial and pro-people, as is claimed, let them prove it.

There is still an ongoing case in the high court [in August it was still ongoing]. Meanwhile the Delhi government has terminated nine hundred anganwadi workers, explicitly on the basis that they took part in the strike. This is totally illegal; there is a legal challenge to that too. One way or another, we are only suspending the strike temporarily. If the judgement goes against us, we will break the law and restart the strike as an act of civil disobedience.



TEA WORKERS ON STRIKE

KATY DOLLAR

Tea workers, members of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), held a daily two-hour strike from 9 August – 12 August. On August 13, this escalated to a full day strike of 150,000 workers at more than 200 Bangladeshi tea plantations.

Bangladesh is amongst the leading tea exporters in the world, with hundreds of plantations across the country. Most tea workers in the Muslim-majority country are low-caste Hindus, the descendants of labourers brought to the plantations by colonial-era British planters. The tea industry is dominated by women workers who, despite long hours and labour-intensive work, receive very little pay and face dangerous conditions. Most work in workplaces with no drinking water or toilet or washing facilities. A survey by the Bangladeshi newspaper *The Daily Star* found less than 10% of tea plantation workers could wash their hands with

soap during the pandemic and 80% had to urinate in the open at work.

The workers are demanding a 150 per cent rise to their dollar-a-day wages, which researchers say are among the lowest in the world.

The minimum wage for a tea plantation worker in the country is 120 taka a day – about \$1.25 at official rates, but only just over a dollar on the free market. The unions are demanding an increase to 300 taka a day, with inflation rising and the currency depreciating. “Nearly 150,000 tea workers have joined the strike today,” said Sitaram Bin, a union leader. “No tea worker will pluck tea leaves or work in the leaf processing plants as long as the authority doesn’t pay heed to our demands,” he told AFP during the strike on 13 August.

Plantation owners have offered an increase of 14 taka a day, after an

18-taka rise last year. The BCSU and Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), the tea garden employers’ body, negotiate a new pay and conditions agreement every two years. An agreement between the BCSU and BTA was last signed on February 25, 2021, fixing the daily cash pay to Tk 120 for “A” class tea gardens, Tk 118 for “B” class gardens and Tk 117 for “C” class tea gardens. These wages were effective from January 1, 2019 to December 30, 2020, as wage negotiations move slowly and increases are usually paid in arrears.

The Bangladeshi government had set up a Minimum Wage Board in the second half of 2019 to fix tea workers’ wages. The wage board sent its recommendation to the labour ministry in June 2021, keeping the daily cash pay unchanged and curtailing some benefits that the tea workers had traditionally been receiving. This recommendation was sent back to the Board by the Ministry of Labour with guidelines on improving pay in the sector. The wage board maintained its position in keeping the wages of tea workers at Tk 120 per day.

Bangladesh has the lowest global wages for the tea industry. At the time of writing, it is yet to be seen whether the government will intervene by setting a legal minimum wage, but the Bangladeshi press has been sympathetic to the wage demands and public support is growing.

The Department of Labour office in Sreemangal and the director general (DG) of the Department of Labour under the labour ministry have threatened the tea workers. In a letter dated August 12, 2022, the DG sent a warning that “such strikes contravene the labour law.”

In a meeting on August 13, the central leaders of BCSU announced its next programme. On August 14 (Sunday, a rest day in almost all tea gardens) and August 15 (national holiday), they would continue to assemble at different locations throughout the tea growing areas to build the campaign. The unions are defying the threats from the government and continue their strike campaign.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

AND THE ROOTS OF TRANSPHOBIA

ZACK MUDDLE

As revolutionary socialists, we fight for the expansion of freedom and human flourishing, and seek to rid our world of oppression and discrimination. We stand in solidarity with the downtrodden, champion individual self-determination and bodily autonomy, and organise to empower people to take control of their own lives. For all these reasons and more, we fight for the liberation of trans, nonbinary, intersex, and gender non-conforming people. This struggle flows naturally from our liberatory principles and our commitment to solidarity, combined with our recognition of reality as it is.

That is a reality in which trans people experience widespread and severe discrimination, hostility, harassment, violence, social exclusion and isolation. Trans people face major obstacles in being recognised as the gender they identify with, and in accessing the medical support they need. Interpersonal and systemic transphobia profoundly harms most trans people, who disproportionately experience mental health difficulties. It is also a reality in which trans rights are not in conflict with the rights of (cis) women.

So what drives this transphobia? Marxist analysis offers us insights into how society works and how it came to be this way. It helps us to understand the world around us, the roots of oppression and exploitation — and how to cut these roots and transform society from bottom to top.

REPRODUCTION OF SOCIETY

All societies require human labour. People labour to create things which satisfy human needs and desires — “use values”. The *capacity* to do this work we call “labour-power”.

“Social reproduction” refers to all the processes whereby a society reproduces itself. Workers need to eat, sleep and rest, and to be looked after when sick. As well as the day-to-day

things we do to meet our needs, such as eating and healthcare, new generations must be born and raised, or people must migrate from other societies. These processes ensure that there are people available to work, and make up the “reproduction of labour-power”. One aspect of this is biological reproduction, including pregnancy, childbirth and (historically) breastfeeding.

Humans are to first approximation sexually dimorphic. Sex isn’t a simple binary, however, and human sexual dimorphism isn’t as tidy as many people think. Crucially, it is orders of magnitude less important in determining individual attributes — or social dynamics — than is generally assumed.

The large majority of people — though certainly not all — have either XX or XY chromosomes, roughly the same number with each. Most of these people have sexual characteristics — genitalia, gonads, hormones, breasts, etc. — broadly aligning with two corresponding clusters. We shouldn’t ignore that personal and social factors influence even these biological characteristics. Exercise and diet impact hormone levels. Castration has been practised for thousands of years; the shaving of facial hair for tens of thousands. Modern medicine can shape an individual’s “biological” sexual characteristics further still.

What matters here is the *rough* dimorphism in reproductive capacity: only humans born with certain sexual characteristics can develop the ability to become pregnant and give birth, and (again, historically) the ability to lactate. During the later months of pregnancy, and during breastfeeding, individuals’ abilities to perform other forms of labour is reduced, providing a material basis for *some* gendered division of labour.

CLASS SOCIETIES

In class societies, the ruling class

controls both the raw materials and the tools we need to produce things. They permit us to use and consume enough of the things we produce to carry on living, working, and reproducing, while appropriating as much of the rest, the “surplus-labour” or “profit”, as possible.

The ruling class seeks to maximise profit by minimising the costs of reproducing the workforce and by maximising the amount of work each of us performs. Activities involved in the reproduction of labour-power not only come at direct costs — such as food eaten — but tend to take time that members of the exploited class could otherwise spend working. And so the reproduction of labour-power incurs both short-term costs and long-term benefits to the ruling class.

One way the ruling class seeks to resolve this tension is by taking advantage of interpersonal relationships. Individuals who are linked by kin or sexuality to a childbearing person tend to take greater responsibility for providing material goods for them when they are less able to work. These individuals are disproportionately people whose reproductive biology precludes them giving birth or breastfeeding: generally, men. In theory, these biological differences would only require a limited gendered division of labour for a relatively short period in people’s lives. In reality, however, it’s generally much more long-lasting, and built into family structures.

Genders of people are constituted, reconstituted, and reinforced on the basis of individuals’ *assumed* reproductive capabilities. Emotional, sexual, intellectual, behavioural and physical qualities; ways of presenting, talking, and identifying; and even unequal moral and spiritual worth are associated with these different classifications of people as women, men, and sometimes other genders.

Both the gendered division of labour and the family are more stable if they last for lifetimes, rather than only during periods of pregnancy and breastfeeding. These tight family bonds mean that

women and men are more likely to take up their respective roles with greater conviction and fewer complaints, and women and men become “specialists” at their respective roles.

Women disproportionately take responsibility for all types of domestic and carework, while men generally provide more material requirements for these processes — food to be cooked, shelter, and other goods or the money to buy these. Men, therefore, acquire more of the means of subsistence *directly* through productive work, while women often rely on male family members for these provisions. This dependence facilitates women’s subjugation, which, in turn, feeds into a social system that justifies providing women with less. The *material precondition* for women’s oppression is not the division of labour itself, but dependence on men for the means of subsistence during childbearing.

CAPITALISM

Under capitalism, the ruling class’s drive to increase profit propels it to organise production under its direct control. Historically, this led to the division by which productive wage-labour takes place in the workplace

and “unproductive” domestic-labour in the home; a division that continues to create rifts between the two forms of labour — performed at different times, in different places, experienced differently. It has also led to a deep-seated ideology of two “separate spheres”: domestic vs. wage labour; private vs. public; family vs. work; “free time” vs. working time; women vs. men.

Capital has an interest in decreasing domestic labour, so that people can undertake wage-labour instead: through the socialisation of tasks such as education, through technological advances such as the washing machine, and through migrant, slave, or prison labour. This is balanced against other interests, from reducing the cost of the welfare state to maintaining low wages.

Capital’s profit motive and cut-throat competition demands dynamism and readily available workers who can be deployed in whatever the latest profitable sector may be. In theory all workers should be equal — or equally exploitable — but this conflicts with capital’s need for a divided working class, hence anti-migrant, racist and other politics designed to sow division. At the same time, capitalism cultivates

ideologies proclaiming human equality and democratic rights. Mismatches between false promises of equality and reality intensify the experience of oppression. As such, gendered oppression can sometimes appear more severe or fundamental than class exploitation, as class exploitation is ideologically built into the promise of equality under the guise of “equal opportunity”. And so capitalism lays the ground for movements for gender equality to emerge; these have often won important steps forward.

Fundamentally though, the costs of eliminating domestic labour are too great, and it will remain in the ruling class’s interest for domestic labour to be disproportionately performed by women. Movements for gender equality alone cannot overthrow capitalism, and so will not cut the gendered division of labour and the oppression of women at the roots.

QUEER OPPRESSION

The advent of capitalism and the shift to individual wages, allowed sexual minorities the freedom to live outside of heterosexual families. The division of UK society into a distinct homosexual minority and a heterosexual majority began in earnest only in the early 1700s.

As we’ve seen, however, it suits capital to maintain and regulate gender roles to ensure social reproduction and maximise profit. So, as non-conforming gender minorities came into view, it precipitated a host of restrictive legislation and moral panics. And, on the one hand, we see the emergence of a new, gender-policing social order, but, on the other, new gender identities and resistance were also emerging for the first time.

“Heteronormativity”, too, emerged via attempts to regulate the queer lifestyles inadvertently permitted by capitalism. Heteronormativity makes specific forms of intimate relations, family, gender, and the gendered division of labour all seem natural, eternal and necessary.

Workers “own” our bodies and “freely” choose or consent to wage-contracts, but are systemically compelled to sell





our labour-power to survive. Workers are compelled to work as a means to an end; they do not control the processes, the product produced, or their part in this process. As such, work, a defining and core aspect of life, is “alienating”; it is demeaning, and appears as a means only to continue existing. Individual workers are alienated from their work, from themselves and each other.

Sexuality, too, becomes associated with compulsion and dispossession; alienated and a means to an end. It is often used instrumentally as a form of escapism, or to obtain sustenance, companionship, shelter, and sometimes money.

TRANS OPPRESSION

Under capitalism, then, both sexuality and gender are instrumentalised, and heteronormativity makes this seem natural. Heteronormativity does this by promoting (biological) “gender essentialist” assumptions: that qualities associated with gender and sexuality can be reduced to innate (normally biological) facts about people.

The ideology of “separate spheres” reinforces gender binarism, and this, coupled with gender essentialism,

encourages the idea that there is both strict biological sexual dimorphism and neat alignment between individuals’ biological characteristics and their identity, behaviour and presentation.

These assumptions come into direct conflict with the existence of nonbinary, intersex, trans binary, and gender nonconforming people.

The growth of separate spheres ideology has led to the segregation of the two supposedly opposing and incompatible genders. Men’s and women’s toilets, for example, are a relatively recent phenomenon. State and corporate bureaucracy has increasingly segregated spaces, and put individuals in boxes. From our birth, through education, health, relationships, employment, licences, bills, finances, and citizenship records and certificates, and even our death certificates, we are followed by an ever-growing deluge of paperwork. Gender is one of the basic categories of many of these.

This creates institutional erasure: nonbinary people can often find no toilet which explicitly permits their entrance, no box or title on forms or documents for them; trans people struggle to be

reclassified from their categorisation at birth; intersex individuals are often shoe-horned into one of two fairly narrow medical or elite sports categories. And of course, on top of institutional erasure, the same people face much interpersonal hostility and social discrimination.

Talia Mae Bettcher, in *Evil Deceivers and Make Believers* (2007) and *Trapped...* (2014) argues that in the dominant gender order, individuals’ gendered presentation euphemistically represents a person’s genitalia or “innate” biological sex. In cases where these appear misaligned or “misrepresenting” – whether by a trans person who hasn’t had surgery, or by a cis person’s gender non-conformity – this is threat to the dominant gender order. Transphobia kicks in to enforce this essentialist gender system, to reassert the euphemistic representation. In doing so it maintains and naturalises the gender order.

This fosters tropes of trans people being either deceptive or delusional, and hence potentially dangerous. These tropes feature prominently in mainstream, far-right and “left” transphobia and serve as a backdrop to transphobic violence, marginalisation, subjugation, and murder.

The conflict between gender binarism and nonbinary people fuels similar issues. Nonbinary identities are erased and dismissed; nonbinary people are interpreted as delusional and treated as binary; and oppressive treatment serves to punish attempted transgressions.

Intersex “correction” surgery aims to enforce the neat and narrow sexual dimorphism as ubiquitous and inescapable, when it is anything but. The promotion of over-simplistic ideas about biological sex, and shoe-horning of individuals into two neat biological categories helps to neutralise the threat to a rigid biological binary world view.

These oppressions occur not because the presence of a comparatively small number of trans people are a serious threat to capitalism’s existence and profits, but as a result of the wider context, in which capitalism seeks to regulate social reproduction by

maintaining a restrictive and oppressive gender order.

TRANS EQUALITY?

Capitalism's systemic potential for greater equality, and ideologies and movements proclaiming human rights apply to LGBTIQ people just as they do to women, cutting – to a limited extent – against the oppressive drives described above. Capitalism's contradictory tendencies clear the way for potential advances in LGBTIQ rights. The ruling class can support LGBTIQ rights, be LGBTIQ or even co-opt parts of the LGBTIQ movement. This is compounded by the fact that children who become LGBTIQ are born into families which are dispersed roughly evenly throughout class-society, unlike, for example, people of colour.

Capitalism continues to drive processes which limit sexual freedom, however, and while heteronormativity has expanded its scope to allow some LGB rights and visibility it remains very much in force. This has given rise to "homonormativity". As narrow forms of lesbian and gay practices and identities have become more normalised and accepted, other types of LGBTIQ identities and gender-nonconforming practices are stigmatised. Acceptable identities are those which emulate the practices or ideals of heterosexual relationships, most significantly around the ability to be "family people" – via gay marriage, for instance.

With this, sexuality-based and gender-based identities and oppression have increasingly diverged. From the origins of homosexual identity in Molly-houses over three centuries ago, where gay men dressed as women, to now – the most prominent queer identities and communities encompassed gendered as well as sexual deviation.

Trans, nonbinary, intersex, and genderqueer people have gained some visibility, if not acceptance. We have faced – and are building the struggle against – more specific, and often heightened, oppression and discrimination. This includes attempts by the far right, the religious right, populist politicians and newspapers, and even some on the ostensible left, to stoke up transphobic hate. This serves

transphobic aims; builds culture war currency; divides the left and working class; and promotes a conspiratorial world-view that hides the real sources of oppression, misery, sexism and gendered violence.

Capitalism's contradictions set the context against which movements for the liberation of working-class and LGBTIQ people and women can fight and win. Important victories have already been won, and these need to be defended, for obvious reasons. Moves towards equality, no matter how limited, can reduce divisions within the working class, uniting us and making it easier to wage new, offensive struggles. Exposing false "equality" as equality in exploitation brings the class exploitation at the foundation of contemporary society into view.

FORMS OF SUBJUGATION

To maintain their hegemony, the ruling class must perpetually take away workers' control of their bodies. Degradation, silencing and violence against women – as well as more naked projects, like the rolling back of abortion rights – deprive women of control, creating vulnerability and dependency, and subjugating both their

labour and reproductive functions. This is intertwined with heteronormativity. Compulsion combined with ideas of two "opposite" genders helps to polarise men and women into compellor and compelled, buttressing women's oppression.

The gendered division of labour impacts – and is impacted by – the way we value different kinds of work. Caregiving is often unpaid, is seen as "women's work" and systematically devalued. This is true of caregiving even when it's done as paid work; it's underpaid and disproportionately undertaken by women, especially women of colour and migrant women.

The different types of activities and work we do affects our sense of our own and other people's (gendered) bodies. In the UK men comprise 90% of "process, plant, and machine operatives" and people in "skilled trades occupations", while women work 78% of "caring, leisure and other service occupations" (ONS, 2017). Within "office work", "administrative and secretarial occupations" are disproportionately done by women, while "associate professional and technical occupations" are disproportionately done by men.



In unpaid work, UK women perform more than twice as much child care and laundry as men on average, and approximately twice as much housework and cooking (ONS, 2016). UK women aged 26–35 perform on average over 34 hours of unpaid labour per week, almost equivalent to a full-time job and twice as much as their male counterparts. Mothers on maternity leave perform almost 60 hours of unpaid work per week, and lower-income individuals do more than higher-income individuals. Of parents with dependent children, fathers are disproportionately in work, not homeworking and without special working arrangements.

Men experience more wage-labour, and in the domestic realm have more of their bodily requirements cared for by others, and the same time as spending more time subject to work-discipline.

These specific forms of alienation mean that sexuality is abstracted from wider social and bodily interactions, reduced to a lust for a particular sex-act, penile-vaginal penetration followed by male ejaculation. Women perform more caregiving, so tend to know sexuality less narrowly, but heteronormativity portrays that sex-act as *the biological* driving force behind sexuality. Gendered power relations frame

sexual consent and coercion. Women sometimes have undesired sex because they feel a sense of implicit pressure or obligation. Women's sexuality and sexual agency is diminished by heteronormativity, and broader power relations both sustain and naturalise sexual coercion.

Rape has widely been used to reinforce domination: against women, under slavery, by invading armies, or against LGBTIQ people. Heteronormative masculinity is tied to a two-way identification between sex and conquest. Sexual violence and coercion is perpetrated disproportionately against more disempowered groups and women, such as the racially or colonially oppressed, working-class, disabled, gender-nonnormative, and children. Sexual assault occurs both so *that* these groups remain disempowered and *because* they are disempowered and more vulnerable to it. But with systematic degradation, sexual assault and attempts to remove control of women's bodies comes resistance, as we've seen with recent movements against sexual harassment and gendered violence in recent years.

TRANS SUBJUGATION

Alienation within capitalism gives rise to reductive and instrumental conceptions of gender. Our bodies are reduced to

(intertwined) sexuality, power, and labour. Differentiated across gendered lines, these constitute the essence of gender. The acts of transitioning and not conforming are often perceived as a means to an end in one of these three areas. Due to biological essentialism, being trans – overstepping the lines of sexuality, power and labour, and thereby violating the gender order – is seen as something that trans people *choose* to do, whereas the behaviour and identification of cis gender-conforming people is perceived as inevitable and natural.

Trans men, gender nonconforming and lesbian women, and women entering traditionally male areas or workforces are therefore often seen as threatening male power. Violence, sexual violence and degrading treatment seeks to punish them and restore their status as disempowered women, as with the rise in rape and violence against women in India as women enter male-dominated workforces.

Julia Serano, in *Whipping Girl* (2016) views transphobia as psychologically motivated by insecurity – about the pressure to live up to gendered practices and ideals, heightened by doubts cast on these ideals through apparent subversion. By belittling the authenticity of trans or nonbinary people, transphobia asserts the cis perpetrator's gender as real and natural. A rise in transphobic violence is occurring in a context of increasing numbers of openly trans people, widespread anxieties about masculinity, and the growth of the far right.

Trans women are seen to want to be objects of desire for men. The fact that women have less power and are otherwise disadvantaged, but are seen as existing for men and men's desires, makes this seem the only plausible reason why trans women would have chosen to transition. Sexualisation, combined with perceived male traits, means they are seen as intentionally threatening men's heterosexuality, by deception. This is the case whether a trans woman "passes" as a (cis) woman initially and are later discovered to be trans, or whether she doesn't pass and is instead perceived to be failing in her attempt at pretending to be a



woman.

Falling outside the heteronormative binary, trans people are often portrayed as sexually undesirable or as sexual deviants, and marginalised, persecuted, attacked, or subjected to “corrective rape”. Transphobia and homophobia are intimately related in that transphobia is often motivated by perceived (deviant) sexual orientation.

Being perceived as or attempting to be women further legitimates violence, objectification and sexual violence against trans women – “choosing” to be women is seen to be “inviting” that. The lust for penetration is understood by large swathes of society to exonerate men of harassment and assault, something we can see in the way that perpetrators of violence against both trans and cisgender women are often treated by criminal courts, and the courts of public opinion. Men are understood as innately driven by sexuality; women as sexually manipulative.

People who don't fit into or transgress traditional genders are widely excluded, facing serious poverty and isolation. This can be seen in the exclusion from traditional sites of both profit-making for the ruling class, work, and performance of domestic labour, families.

Exclusion throughout the labour-market combined with sexual objectification disproportionately pushes trans people and especially trans women towards sex work, a more risky type of work than most. In sex work trans women face particular dangers from heterosexual men.

TRANS WOMEN AS WOMEN

It is clear that although on a systemic level women's oppression latches onto women's reproductive biology, on an individual level the aspects of the person that the oppression acts upon are varied and are generally not directly biological sex or genitalia – either at that moment or at birth. Often, differential treatment and oppression are based on perceived or actual gender, gender identity, gendered practices and gender presentation, or some combination of these. These may be



associated with a particular biological sex, but such perceptions are often inaccurate and oversimplify reality.

Capitalism and heteronormativity reinforce differentiated and easily identifiable gender categories with associated practices and presentations; this in turn restricts and oppresses people according to the box they have been placed in, their gendered behaviours, and how they appear.

Cis women are very diverse, and women's oppression is most beneficial for capitalism if it has a wide scope, applying to all or almost all women. As such it does not precisely and decisively target *all* and *only* women on any single basis. Women who are infertile are still oppressed as women, facing discrimination, harassment and violence, despite individually lacking a material precondition for the development of society-wide gendered oppression. Likewise, women's genes, hormones, genitalia or birth certificate are not generally known or checked before men sexually harass them or employers discriminate against them. Men, women and nonbinary people are victimised on the grounds of “femininity” – taking on characteristics associated with women – reinforcing perceived superiority of masculinity

and maleness over femininity and femaleness. Men working in traditional “women's jobs” face worse pay than in “men's jobs”, even if they tend to be paid better than women in the same job.

Through identifying as women and often embracing some associated behaviour and ways of presenting, trans women face most of the oppressions cis women face – including individuals who do not always “pass” as (cis) “women” – as well as transphobia. This means that trans women are victims of more harassment, violence and poverty than cis women, trans men or nonbinary people.

Understanding the roots of gendered oppression gives us the tools to build an inclusive and broad movement for our liberation. Feminists, gender non-conformists and trans activists have a strong basis for common cause in the struggle against oppression and the fight to overthrow capitalism, something that we can only do together.

Read the full essay at:
bit.ly/roots-of-transphobia

DRAG QUEENS VS THE FAR RIGHT

LUKE HARDY

On 7 August, fascists from Patriotic Alternative turned up in Leeds to protest Drag Queen Story Hour. These storytimes for kids, where stories are read by drag performers, originated in San Francisco in 2016. Author Michelle Tea, who is behind the events, sought to “inspire a love of reading, while teaching deeper lessons on diversity, self-love and an appreciation of others”.

The vast majority of people would surely see this as innocuous fun and it has proved to be very popular, spreading across the US and overseas. However, from 2019 onwards, white supremacists and neo-Nazis in America began to target these events, accusing them of “sexualising kids” and pushing “gender ideology”. Now, the far right didn’t protest pantomime dames, picket Mrs Doubtfire, or burn Enid Blyton books.

Gender fluidity has been a mainstay in children’s literature and media for a long long time, but the wave of trans- and homophobia we’re seeing now is something new.

Leeds Pride was due to host three of these events, hosted by Aida H Dee, until Patriotic Alternative announced their plans to protest. The council switched the plan from three events across three different libraries to two sessions at the central library in the city centre. Concerns over safety are understandable, but it provided the bigots and fascists with a win from the get go.

Patriotic Alternative are a relatively new group, founded by Mark Collett and others. Collett is a notorious figure on the far right. He was the leader of

the Young BNP, who has been exposed as a Hitler admiring holocaust denier in a Channel 4 documentary. Unlike the biggest far right groups of the last decade, who at least pretended to reject biological racism, Patriotic Alternative are openly white nationalists and antisemitic.

A counterprotest against Patriotic Alternative was organised quickly and on the day. between 150 and 200 anti-fascists, trade unionists and young LGBT and queer people faced off across barriers against 40 to 50 members of Patriotic Alternative, with the entrance to the library and art gallery in between.

Patriotic Alternative did not seem to have brought anyone else from either the far right or “gender critical” movement with them. This is different from the situation elsewhere and may reflect how toxic PA are even on the far right. Their placards and speeches accused the event of grooming children and called their opponents paedophiles.

There was a bit of a dearth of politics on the anti-fascist side. Most of the chants were just “go home”, “whose streets our streets”, etc. The protest was also rather performative: there was no attempt by either side to push back each other or leave the pre-arranged protest point. But by all accounts both sessions of the Story Hour were full and the kids really enjoyed it. It was good to outnumber the fascists and the energy amongst the crowd was fantastic.

Patriotic Alternative claim they got what they wanted out of the day but their failure to bring out more than their own members surely suggests that this is not working to build the group, and that they’re losing the argument.



Women’s Fightback is a socialist feminist publication produced by Workers’ Liberty.

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