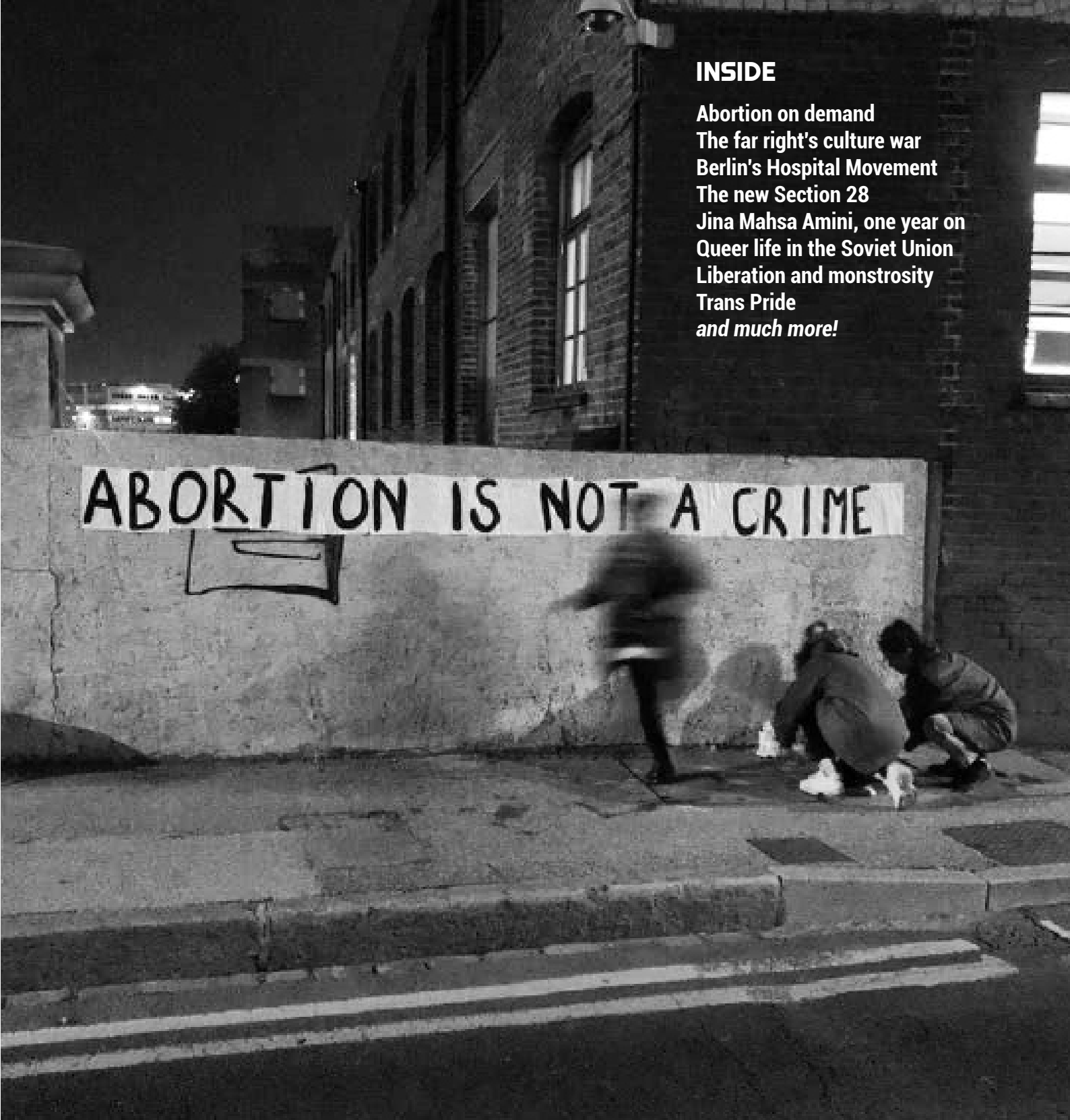




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The far right's culture war

Berlin's Hospital Movement

The new Section 28

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Trans Pride

and much more!

ABORTION IS NOT A CRIME

WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

ISSUE 29 AUTUMN 2023

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A SOCIALIST FEMINIST MAGAZINE BY WORKERS' LIBERTY



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

We stand for trans-inclusive, sex-positive, class struggle feminism. We organise in our workplaces, trade unions, communities and in the Labour Party for socialist feminist politics.

If you would like to organise with us, or contribute to *Women's Fightback*, please write to us at:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org

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IN THIS ISSUE

Since the last edition of *Women's Fightback*, Carla Foster was sentenced to over two years in prison for having an abortion past the legal term-limit. Bethany Cox is also facing a potential jail term.

Abortion is a crucial battleground in the culture war engulfing our politics. In the US, religious reactionaries fought for decades to overturn *Roe vs Wade*. In Latin America, feminist movements have won advances for abortion rights. Nowhere is this issue uncontested; intersecting it are debates about bodily autonomy, class, religion...

This edition covers a wide range of topics, from the uprising in Iran, to the history of queer life in the USSR, to the politics of Barbie. But we've devoted the largest portion to abortion and reproductive justice.

Workers' Liberty is campaigning for the full decriminalisation of abortion. We hope that this issue inspires you to get involved.

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Editor: Kelly Rogers

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NOTES FROM BERLIN

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE HOSPITAL MOVEMENT

In September 2021 thousands of healthworkers launched an indefinite strike at Charité and Vivantes, two of Berlin's large municipal hospitals. So began the *Krankenhausbewegung* - Berlin's Hospital Movement. After a month, they won.

A year later, nurses in the UK underwent their own industrial awakening, as the Royal College of Nursing balloted for

nationwide strike action over pay. The differences between the disputes could not have been more stark, as a series of obstacles — some erected by anti-union laws, others by their own union — combined to defeat the UK nurses, despite overwhelming public support.

Women's Fightback interviewed Stella Merendino, an Emergency Department nurse working in Vivantes hospitals, who went on to play a leading role in the movement.

ROOTS OF THE DISPUTE

The roots of the Hospital Movement will be familiar to British readers: rightwing reforms to the healthcare system and the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the early 2000s, Germany introduced a system, already in use in the US and UK, in which hospitals receive a set fee for a procedure or course of treatment, regardless of how much it actually costs to deliver (the system is known as Diagnosis Related Groups, or DRGs).

Unsurprisingly, hospital managements have sought to exploit the system — if they can drive down the costs of treatment, they can pocket the difference. To rightwing politicians and lazy journalists, this can be chalked up as "efficiency"; anyone who works in healthcare will know that it is a recipe for poor quality care. In particular, DRGs have created an incentive to drastically cut the number of nursing jobs. Simultaneously, many hospitals have

outsourced many of their non-medical roles in an attempt to drive down wages.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, the German healthcare system was in much better shape than the NHS, but things were still very bad for those on the ground. "Everyone was at the end of their strength", says Merendino. Towards the end of 2020, organisers for Verdi, the public sector union, began to campaign around better staff-to-patient ratios and working conditions, and Merendino was quickly recruited: "I was on fire from the first moment because I knew what it meant for our patients. Short staffing kills people." She immediately got to work mobilising her colleagues: "It only took two weeks to get the whole Emergency Department organised," she says, "which was pretty crazy, but shows you just how bad the conditions were."

OVERCOMING DIVIDES

The Berlin Hospital Movement and the UK nurses' strikes share a common backdrop, but that is where the similarities end. In the UK, the dispute was led by the Royal College of Nursing, which is strictly limited to nursing staff and only recently admitted healthcare assistants. It is one of a patchwork of (sometimes competing) unions in the health sector. Verdi, on the other hand, represents workers across the public sector, including all grades of hospital workers. Activists immediately sought to build alliances with waste disposal, cleaning and other workers, whose jobs





had been outsourced in an attempt to reduce costs.

An NHS-wide strike could have been possible in the UK if Unison, the biggest health union representing non-medical staff, had managed to win their strike ballot. As it happened, they lost — a story for another article, perhaps — and spent the subsequent months instructing their members, nurses included, to cross picket lines.

“After I organised my Emergency Department, I started to help out with different hospitals, in different units to help others get organised within the union,” says Merendino. Whereas traditional trade unions focus on recruitment as a first step, in this case “you didn’t need to be a union member to get involved in this fight for better working conditions. I think this was quite a big thing, because no one felt pressured to get into the union — even if they did join in the end.”

In the UK, the RCN leadership pursued a sectional and apolitical strategy. It stayed out of politics — even going so far as to order members not to bring anti-Tory placards to picket lines — in an attempt to maintain a respectable image. While in talks with the government, the RCN openly declared its support for a separate pay scale for nurses, which would allow its members to negotiate separate pay deals while leaving lower-paid NHS workers on the old contracts. The Hospital Movement, on the other

hand, sought to overcome divides in the workplace and actively sought to exploit the backdrop of the 2021 federal election. “I spoke to the press a lot”, says Merendino, “and we invited politicians to our Emergency Department to show them how bad the conditions were. It was very interesting how politicians talk to people just prior to elections: ‘everything will get better when we are in power’ blah blah blah.” Ultimately, she adds, “they needed to back us because if they didn’t it would endanger their election prospects.”

For many nurses, the Hospital Movement was a way into a wider political world. “As a union you always have a political standing,” she says, “and you should use that to stay on the good side. We’re definitely on the left and we’re very proud of it. We have many connections with queer organisations, feminists, homeless projects, anti-racist and anti-fascist movements, and so on. We keep each other informed about demonstrations. Our fight is not just within the health system but against all injustice and discrimination.”

DEMANDING

Rather than being initiated and controlled by a trade union bureaucracy, the Berlin strikes were based on organising in the workplace, with months of painstaking work and an attempt to organise meetings in every unit of the hospitals. Demands were formulated at the lowest possible level, rather than being distilled by supposed experts at Verdi’s headquarters.

Eventually, they came up with four demands: better nurse-patient ratios; a clear means for enforcing these ratios; better conditions for those in training; and a pay rise for outsourced workers.

As the mood of the struggle built, organisers put on rallies and engaged in other demonstrations of collective strength. It all culminated in the handing-in of what amounted to an ultimatum, signed by more than eight thousand health workers: either reach a settlement within a hundred days, or face an all-out indefinite strike.

When, by September 2021, no deal was forthcoming, the strikes went ahead and the struggle went from being hard work to being all-consuming. “I don’t know how I survived it really,” says Merendino. “You always had your head in the negotiations, or in talks with politicians, or with the press. You tried to have some sort of private life — but if I’m honest, my private life wasn’t a priority because there was so much at stake.”

WORKER EXPERTS

The engine of the Hospital Movement was its democracy. Workers took control of the strike, with delegates elected from every unit in the hospitals taking a direct part in decision-making and in the negotiations. As Merendino explains, this was a major shift for Verdi. “In negotiations, our union usually works with a lead negotiator. There are usually just a few people in the room. But we didn’t want just anyone negotiating our nurse-patient ratio, because

union negotiators don't work in those departments or units. We are the experts on our units."

The union bureaucracy was blown along by the intensity of the dispute. "Because we organised so many people into the union in such a short period of time, they were forced to do it our way," Merendino says. "We had a system of delegates, so that each unit had 2-4 delegates, and every decision that was made during negotiations was being run past the delegates. Delegates would have time to discuss with their teams also." They had a negotiating team of about twenty, including Merendino, who took their orders from a mass meeting of delegates in a nearby room throughout the negotiations.

The high level of agency for activists served to keep spirits high even as exhaustion set in. "The whole length of it was brutal", Merendino says. "You would sit there until 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. But we were there with co-workers, who all wanted the same thing – you would make great friends. In the end, all those efforts and all those sleepless nights did something for us."

In any healthcare strike, the issue of whether and how to provide cover (or "derogations" in union jargon) is always a heated debate. In the end, both the RCN in the UK and Verdi in Berlin sent nurses to work during the strike to cover life-preserving services. But again, the manner in which this was organised could not have been more different. The RCN's derogations were decided by centrally appointed 'strike committees', which could be overruled (and in many cases were overruled) by unelected bureaucrats in union HQ. In the Hospital Movement strikes, workers in hospital units decided themselves how many people should work. In the Emergency Department, they chose the same number as the most under-staffed shift in the previous six weeks.

But how did all of this bottom-up democracy sit with a massive, institutional machine like Verdi? "I think that the union weren't very happy about it at first," Merendino says. "They didn't expect to have 2,000 people getting organised in just a few months, but it happened. Those 2,000 people were very motivated and they wanted change. So Verdi were forced into giving

us a voice. In the end, they could see the benefit. Before, we would have people sitting there who had never even worked in the hospital – or in whatever workplace, depending on what strike it was. Now they have a network of worker-experts that they can rely on. It has lasted in Berlin, and has been adopted in other cities."

WINNING AND SPREADING

The standard way to run (and lose) an industrial dispute in the UK at the moment is to call short, disconnected spasms of strike action over a marathon-length period of time, in the hope that the employer will somehow become tired and give up. Not in Berlin. The Hospital Movement walked out for an indefinite period. Crucial to their ability to keep going was decent strike pay from Verdi – 80 percent pay for the nurses, and (after some crowdfunding) more than that for outsourced workers. By the beginning of October, after just one month of all-out strike, they had been offered a raft of concessions and ended the dispute.

They didn't get everything. They won improved nurse-to-patient ratios (though not ones as good as they had initially demanded), and a means of enforcing them: nurses are now paid

extra for working on understaffed shifts and get paid time off as compensation. Outsourced workers will get a pay rise, though will still not be on the same contracts as public sector workers, and are still outsourced. "The next step will be to take on outsourcing," Merendino says.

In the aftermath of the Hospital Movement strikes, other health workers have begun to organise across Germany, using the same demands. A year later, an eleven week Verdi strike in North Rhine-Westphalia (which includes the cities of Aachen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Essen, Cologne and Münster) ended with a similar set of concessions from hospital managers. "We can't change the whole union movement in Germany in just one year or two," Merendino says, "but it is happening gradually and it is a really good change."

GIVE US WHAT WE WANT

In the UK, the nurses strikes were the backbone of the largest wave of strike action so far this century. They garnered a small increase in pay as a result of their action, but the majority were disappointed as it didn't come close to what they had demanded. So what lessons are there to learn? The RCN dispute was tightly controlled



by the union bureaucracy. Unelected officials ordered members around, determined the strategy of the dispute and hand-picked the strike committees; later the minimal power that the strike committees had was taken away from them.

The leadership of the union ran a respectable, politically neutral campaign consisting of short strikes. Its supposedly clever, expert negotiators caved and recommended a terrible deal. Eventually the dispute collapsed out of alienation and fatigue. The situation had looked promising – RCN members turned over their leadership in their internal consultation and rejected the government's offer – but trust and confidence in the dispute crumbled. The rebalot was lost. In Berlin, nurses won – and they did so by running a democratic, worker-led campaign that was the opposite of the model deployed by many traditional unions. Trust was maintained throughout, especially during the crucial period of negotiations, because the workers were at the helm every step of the way.

The rising militancy of health workers presents a huge opportunity, not just for the left but for the cause of feminism. This is a sector dominated by women. Nurses and care workers have historically been reluctant to strike, susceptible to the mythology of 'vocation', and stigmatised when they take action. Across the world, millions of healthcare workers are coming to understand the reality of the work they do, and the leverage they have. "There is one option," Merendino says, "and that is to give us what we want."

- Workers' Liberty has a number of industrial "fractions", including our health fraction, which we use to organise our activity in our trade unions. We believe that being organised, and discussing ideas and strategies collectively, puts us in the best stead to push our unions towards democratic, worker-led action which will win.



ABORTION OUR DEMANDS

REPRODUCTIVE
JUSTICE

DANIELLE MAISE

In June this year, Carla Foster was sentenced to two years in prison for having an abortion after the legal term limit of 24 weeks. The case highlighted just how limited and fragile our abortion rights are. She was sentenced under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. This law is still the foundation of abortion law in Britain: it criminalises all abortions and carries the maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

The 1967 Abortion Act legalised abortion under certain conditions, with an authorised provider. But as it didn't repeal the 1861 Act, abortion remains illegal unless certain conditions are met. An abortion must secure the approval of two doctors, who must agree that continuing with the pregnancy would

endanger the mental or physical health of the woman or pregnant person, and the termination must take place before the legal term limit of 24 weeks, except in the case of risk to the mother's life or 'severe disability'.

Carla Foster won her appeal, has had her sentence reduced (note: not overturned) and has been released from prison. But only a few weeks later, another woman was charged. 22-year-old Bethany Cox faces trial in January next year. She is the fourth woman to be prosecuted for allegedly carrying out an illegal abortion in eight months.

Both the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists say

police investigations following later-term miscarriages and stillbirths are on the rise. In 2021, a 15-year old girl who had an unexplained early stillbirth was subjected to a year-long criminal investigation that involved having her phone and laptop searched. In 2022, a woman was kept in a prison cell for 36 hours after a stillbirth, due to suspicions she had an abortion after the 24-week limit.

DEMANDS

Not one more woman should face criminal investigation for having an abortion, and to that end we must demand the full decriminalisation of abortion now.

But decriminalisation will not be enough on its own. We need to remove all barriers to abortion access. That means:

- **The abolition of term limits.** Even with decriminalisation, term limits will mean that women like Carla Foster would still be forced into riskier, medically-supervised methods. We need access to safe and legal abortion as early as possible and as late as necessary.

- **Abortion on demand.** We must abolish the two-doctor rule and the requirement to prove that continuing with the pregnancy would involve greater risk to our mental or physical health. Simply not wanting to be pregnant should be reason enough. These constraints put pressure on women and pregnant people to question their reasons, as well as enabling anti-abortion doctors to undermine and obstruct access to abortion.

- **Not just in law, but in practice too.** We also need to win abortion on demand in practice. Although abortion is now decriminalised in Northern Ireland, it is still not available to most women due to a lack of services. In the rest of the UK, there is chronic underfunding, under-provision and under-resourcing of abortion services. Access to abortion is a postcode lottery, where in some areas, women are travelling hundreds of miles or waiting weeks to be seen.

Nearly three-quarters of abortions are carried out by private providers, funded by the NHS. According to a 2022 report by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' abortion taskforce, the quality of abortion provision is

poorer, less safe and less consistent across the UK due to historic variation in funding and the exclusion of NHS Trusts from many contracts. Abortion care also fails to meet NICE (National Institute of Health and Care Excellence) guidelines, which require abortion procedures to be available within one week of assessment.

NHS underfunding and under-resourcing are also limiting the choice of abortion methods available. The two methods are surgical abortion and medical abortion. Surgical abortions take place in a clinic or hospital, under sedation or anaesthetic, and require a couple of hours' stay. Medical abortions involve taking two pills to induce abortion at home, which takes a few days.

Medical abortions are now by far the most common method before 12 weeks. They are favoured by NHS and private providers because they are much cheaper and easier to provide. Medical abortion will be many women and pregnant people's first choice because they can stay home, and pills can now be ordered online via a Telemedicine consultation. But it won't be everyone's preference. Medical abortions mean days of very heavy bleeding, intense cramps and fever. This isn't something that can be easily hidden from others in the home, such as parents or an abusive partner. It is also not safe for those with a variety of medical histories. Women who need or prefer a surgical abortion are often forced to wait weeks for an appointment or travel far from home to the nearest suitable clinic.

There is very little provision through NHS Trusts for abortions above 14 weeks. At later gestations, only a few NHS Trusts in England provide abortions, and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is no provision at all.

We need to fight for access to a full and free choice of procedure, available locally for all, and as close to home as possible. Abortion services should be fully integrated into NHS sexual and reproductive health services. Trained nurses and midwives should be allowed to carry out abortions and prescribe abortion medication. At present, although nurses can carry out vacuum aspiration procedures for patients that have had a miscarriage, only doctors

can perform the same procedure in a surgical abortion.

The fight for a huge expansion of abortion and contraception services means campaigning to rebuild the NHS. This includes demanding a huge increase in funding, paid for by taxing the rich, abolishing financial charges for migrants, and relaunching NHS workers' fight for a real pay rise, so we can begin to solve the recruitment crisis.

The morning after pill should be free for all, available in all pharmacies, and we must abolish the mandatory counselling by pharmacists that is both shaming and unnecessary.

We need improved sex and relationships education in schools and we must defend SRE from attacks from the religious right.

We must defend the Gillick competency when it is attacked by transphobes and link the struggle for trans rights with the struggle for reproductive freedom. Those who want to restrict trans children and young people's right to consent to gender affirming healthcare, such as puberty blockers, also threaten under-16s' access to abortion and contraception.

Reproductive freedom is also about being able to decide to have a child, if and when we choose to do so. Winning reproductive freedom means fighting the wider inequalities that stand in the way of our right to choose, such as housing, pay, benefits (including the two-child benefit cap), childcare, migrants' rights, disability rights and social care.

- **Workers' Liberty activists** are currently discussing how we can shape the fight to defend and extend our reproductive freedom, bringing our campaigning into the unions and pushing for the labour movement to join the fight. Get involved by emailing: womensfightback@workersliberty.org

BODIES UNDER SIEGE

KELLY ROGERS

• *Bodies Under Siege: How the Far-Right Attack on Reproductive Rights Went Global*, by Sian Norris (Verso, 2023)

In the last year, four women in the UK have been prosecuted for carrying out illegal abortions. This is especially shocking when you consider that in the 160 years prior there were only three. There has been a corresponding rise in criminal investigations, which are not only invasive and traumatic for those involved, but also suggest that further prosecutions are coming down the line. But why now? In her book, *Bodies Under Siege*, Sian Norris sets out the links between the rising far right and the wave of anti-abortion initiatives taking hold across Europe and the United States.

FAR RIGHT

Norris's starting point is the place that women — and women's bodies — have in fascist ideology. Central to this ideology is the belief in a "natural order" predicated on patriarchal authority and white supremacy.

The far right consistently links abortion to a conspiracy they call the "Great Replacement", whereby abortion, alongside migration from the global south, is leading to the collapse of white-majority nations. The Great Replacement is, so the theory goes, being driven by so-called "cultural Marxist elites" — a term that is rooted in antisemitism but has become a catch-all to include Jewish people, feminists,

the left, Black Lives Matter activists, the EU and the US Democrats, amongst other things. At the heart of the Great Replacement theory is the call to take control of women's reproduction; meanwhile people of colour must be removed, sterilised or exterminated in a genocidal race war.

Then came QAnon, another conspiracy theory that emerged in 2017 on the message boards of 4Chan. According to followers of the theory, a left-leaning elite of — yes, you got it — "cultural Marxists" runs a cabal of cannibalistic child molesters. Abortion, they say, is used for ritual satanic sacrifice, the aim being to de-Christianise the West and execute the Great Replacement. Despite being utterly unhinged, these ideas have been successfully mainstreamed, especially in the US, where the Republican Party has been, to a significant degree, captured by the far right. Some polls estimate that as many as 1-in-5 Americans believe in some element of the QAnon conspiracy.

This isn't the first satanic panic to take hold in the US. After the passing of *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, a popular movement emerged in which men, claiming to be former satanists, stated that the world was being run by a satanic cult. This movement continued into the 1980s, in direct response to improvements in women's social and economic status, and played a significant role in strengthening the new Evangelical right.

TRUMP

QAnon moved offline and into the real-world when on 6 January 2021, supporters of Donald Trump launched an attempted coup. Many believed that Trump would lead a far right revolution, what they were calling "Day X". Storming the Capitol building in Washington DC, they sought to keep Trump in power. The mob brought together QAnon followers, far right extremist groups, and prominent anti-abortion activists. Among them was John Brockhoeft, an anti-abortionist who was jailed for firebombing a Planned Parenthood clinic in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1985. In a newsletter published from prison, he described the murder of doctors providing abortion as "justifiable homicide".

The mob eventually went home on Trump's instruction. That night, 147 Republicans voted to support the claim that the Presidential election had been invalid. Amongst them were Congressmen and women that had publicly promoted the QAnon conspiracy theory. In the months that followed, Republicans continued their vicious campaign against civil liberties, including the right to safe, legal abortion.

Trumpism had relied on hyper-online, misogynistic communities since its beginning. Indeed, the 2016 election was epitomised by scandals about "pussy-grabbing" and the like, and



became a flashpoint for “Incels” and men’s rights activists. After his election, Trump appointed anti-abortion judges to the Supreme Court, and the four years of his Presidency saw a cataclysmic wave of anti-abortion measures. These included: the introduction of heartbeat bills limiting abortion to the first six weeks; the forced closure of abortion clinics; the implementation of TRAP laws; and the introduction of state laws requiring funerals for aborted fetuses.

Although he lost in 2020, by then Trumpism had successfully turbo-charged the culture war and instigated a hardline anti-abortion judiciary. The road was clear, and in June 2022 the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade*. 21 US states have now implemented a near-total ban on abortion or severely restricted access to it. The clinics in states that continue to provide abortions are overwhelmed.

EUROPE

In 2013, religious right network Agenda Europe held its inaugural conference in London, in which approximately 20 North American and European anti-abortionists set themselves the task of devising “new strategies for European anti-abortion movements”. The network’s manifesto, carrying the revealing title “Restoring the Natural Order”, has been described by Ellen Rivera, in her study of the influence of Agenda Europe in Spain, as “part theological tract, part anti-communist pamphlet, part far right conspiracy theory, and part totalitarian roadmap”. It sets out a blueprint of incremental changes to abortion rights, with the ultimate goal of a total ban. These changes include: bans on terminations in cases of foetal defect; narrowing term limits; the requirement of minors to secure parental consent; mandatory counselling and cooling-off periods; and introducing vexatious regulations that make it more difficult for abortion clinics to operate.

In *Bodies Under Siege*, Norris draws concrete links between Agenda Europe and a number of other anti-abortion, anti-LGBT organisations, the World Congress of Families, CitizenGo, HazteOir (in Spain), Ordo Iuris (in Poland) and the Alliance Defending Freedom (in the UK) among them. She also demonstrates the influence that

...continued overleaf.

OUR POLICY: ABORTION AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE, AS LATE AS NECESSARY

In April this year, members of Workers' Liberty convened for our annual democratic conference. We passed this policy, launching a programme of activity campaigning for the decriminalisation of abortion, the abolition of term limits and expansion of reproductive rights.

Policy barriers to safe abortion include criminalisation, mandatory waiting times, the requirement that approval must be given by other people or institutions, financial charges (e.g. for some migrants), insufficient levels of provision and limits on when during pregnancy an abortion can take place. Such barriers can lead to critical delays in

• Workers' Liberty is a democratic, member-led organisation. Get in touch to learn more about joining Workers' Liberty and what we do: office@workersliberty.org

accessing treatment and increase risk of unsafe abortion, stigmatisation, and health complications. Some barriers are used by anti-choice individuals and organisations to push women past legal term limits to prevent legal abortion.

We are for the removal of all these barriers and the decriminalisation of abortion, which would lead to it being regulated in the same way as other healthcare procedures.

Our support for abortion rights is based on bodily autonomy. Nobody should be forced to stay pregnant against their wishes.





Agenda Europe, and its sister and front organisations, have had on mainstream politics. Hungary and Poland are two prime examples, but the influence of these organisations on political parties and politicians extends to Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia and elsewhere.

Viktor Orbán welcomed the World Congress of Families (WCF) to Hungary, when Budapest hosted its annual conference in 2017. Orbán gave the keynote speech where he called on Hungarians to have more children and attacked the EU for its liberal ideology, which is described as “an insult to families”. Since then he has spoken repeatedly in public about Hungary’s “demographic winter” and the Great Replacement, catapulting a fringe conspiracy theory into mainstream politics. The WCF describes Hungary as “an advocate for the natural family in Europe” and has celebrated the redrafted Hungarian constitution, which grants an unborn foetus rights and defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Orbán has subsequently introduced measures that allow hospitals to refuse to perform abortions, instead forcing women to undergo mandatory counselling and a three-day cooling-off period; a measure taken directly out of the Agenda Europe playbook.

Poland has gone even further. Ordo Iuris has played a prominent role in legal battles against sex education and so-called “LGBT ideology” in Poland. But its main success has been its campaign to limit access to abortion, prohibiting abortions in cases of foetal abnormality. Poland has seen huge waves of feminist protests in recent years. In 2016 when the Law and Justice Party first attempted to introduce the restriction, supported by Ordo Iuris, the protests held off the reform. In 2018, the government tried again – Polish women once again fought back. Finally, in 2020, the government succeeded; sustained attacks on Poland’s judiciary meant that new restrictions could be imposed free from democratic oversight.

After the introduction of the near-total ban, the number of legal abortions dropped 90% compared to a year earlier. But Ordo Iuris hasn’t stopped there. Last year, they published guidance encouraging the prosecution of those who use, supply or advertise abortion pills sent by post, the primary means by which people access abortion. They also carried out an “audit” of hospitals, determining whether they were providing abortions to refugees from Ukraine, and have campaigned for hospitals to take legal steps to verify that refugees were telling the truth when reporting that they had been raped.

Rape is one of only two remaining situations in which people in Poland can access abortion.

Alliance Defending Freedom was set up in the US in 1994. Its focus is fighting court battles and it claims to have won 80 percent of all the cases that it has fought. Amongst its victories one can find state bans on late-term abortions and dismantling buffer zones around abortion clinics – these zones protect service users from harassment by anti-abortion protestors. The ADF played an important role in paving the way to the overturning of *Roe vs Wade*.

BRITAIN

Alliance Defending Freedom’s European wing, ADF International, is seeking to replicate these successes in the UK. The main focus at present is buffer zones. They want to keep them out of British law and dismantle them where they exist, arguing that anti-abortionists have a right to free speech. A number of Tory MPs have taken up this argument in Parliament; MPs that have proven links with the ADF, the World Congress of Families and CitizenGo. Amongst them is Nadine Dorries, who in 2011 submitted a Bill to Parliament seeking to ban abortion providers from offering counselling to women with unwanted pregnancies.

Brexit accelerated a culture war that has produced fertile ground for far right groups like ADF International, Patriotic Alternative and Turning Point UK. Brexit emboldened those with hateful and bigoted views, leading to an increase in racist, xenophobic and anti-LGBT hate crimes. And for many, the new common-sense is that white, conservative males – AKA “the white working class” or “ordinary people” depending on who you’re talking to – are being silenced by a “woke mob”.

Mark Collett, UK neo-Nazi who founded the fascist group Patriotic Alternative, shared a cartoon on Telegram depicting white women queuing at an abortion clinic and a line of hijab-wearing women outside a maternity ward. The image was captioned, “this is white genocide”. It’s one of many like it circulating on Telegram, Reddit and Gab. Jim Dowson, who founded the anti-abortion UK Life League and co-founded the fascist, anti-Muslim group Britain First, is also very prominent in the UK. He spends much of his time producing online content,

videos that weave in anti-abortion speeches with far right conspiracy theories and pro-Putin messages.

Unfortunately, these organisations have been gaining some momentum – Patriotic Alternative has been organising protests across the UK outside hotels housing asylum seekers and refugees. It has also co-ordinated countryside hikes and local litter picking initiatives to try and garner support. Patriotic Alternative recently split, with some members leaving to form a new group, Homeland. Red Flare, an organisation that investigates the far right, described Homeland as “a distillation of the most dangerous elements into something harder, more serious and better organised”.

Patriotic Alternative, alongside Turning Point UK – whose sister organisation Turning Point USA organised the buses that took the extremist militias to Washington DC on 6 January 2021 – have also been protesting drag events. In recent years, trans, queer and gender non-conforming people have been a central target of far right hate. Indeed, anti-trans bigotry has united the broader far right in a way that few other issues have managed. This should come as no surprise: gender is, in the view of the far right, innate and immutable and traditional gender roles determine one's place in the so-called natural order.

The far right has formed an unexpected alliance with women anti-trans activists, some of whom originally herald from the left and claim to be feminists. Unlikely partners, the two camps share common ground on issues such as protecting single-sex spaces and women's sports. Individuals and organisations share platforms with fascists (not all, it should be said – objectionable though they are, Woman's Place UK have denounced those working with the far right). In doing so, these so-called “gender critical” feminists have found common cause with a right that wants to criminalise trans people, stigmatise gender non-conformity and subordinate women. And it doesn't stop there. In June this year, Kathleen Stock, a prominent “gender critical” feminist, published an article titled “The Perils of Reproductive Extremism”. In it she argued for the continued criminalisation of abortion, mere days after Carla Foster was sent to prison, and for the father's right to influence the decision



• Turning Point UK has been organising far right protests against drag events. Workers' Liberty members have joined the counter-demos. Photo: anti-fascist mobilisation outside the drag story hour at the Honor Oak Pub in Lewisham, London.

of whether someone should get an abortion or not. Not only have “gender critical” feminists fuelled the right's war on trans people, in Stock's case she's coming after our reproductive rights too.

In this context, it's perhaps unsurprising that we appear to be losing the culture war. The Conservatives, historically an institutional barrier to the rise of the extreme right, has now itself turned into a far right party of sorts. It's no coincidence that the Tories are now pursuing a barbaric scheme to deport migrants to Rwanda. Nor is it a coincidence that they are now preparing a “new Section 28” which will force schoolworkers to “out” trans students. Migrants' rights, trans rights and reproductive rights are all firmly in the crosshairs of the right. It is essential that we are united in our struggle against oppression in all its forms.

WAKE-UP CALL

At this stage it is not entirely clear why we are seeing such a spike in criminal investigations against people having abortions in the UK. But evidently something is going on.

In *Bodies Under Siege*, Sian Norris draws a clear line between fascist ideology, the role of conspiracy theories

in popularising fascist thought, the web of religious right organisations working to roll back our civil liberties, and finally the mainstream politicians that have long had connections with these far right projects. But while Norris is right to sound the alarm about the influence of these groups, it would be wrong to say that Trump and the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* came about purely by design – these things are messy and complicated. Trumpism is rooted at least as much in the long-standing Evangelical right, as it is in new-fangled conspiracy theories and far right message boards. Trump was, ultimately, a horrible, perfect storm and it is far from a foregone conclusion that the anti-abortion lobby will have the same level of success in the UK.

But what Norris has helped clarify is that the anti-abortion, anti-LGBT, anti-woman religious right is a force to be reckoned with. It's organised, it's well-funded and at the moment it's riding a wave of rising far right sentiment across Europe. And, as always, women's bodies are a terrain that the right seeks to control and which we must defend. As such, *Bodies Under Siege* is a much needed wake-up call.



CHOOSE LIFE, HAVE AN ABORTION

POLAND

LIZZY BROOKS

Since January 2021, Poland has had a near-total ban on abortion. Before this, Poland already had some of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, which only allowed for abortions in a small number of scenarios: if the pregnant person has been raped or the pregnancy has resulted from incest; if their life was in danger; or in cases of severe foetal abnormality. The ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal declared the last of these no longer valid. In 2020, there were approximately 1,000 legal abortions. Following the introduction of the new law, that number fell by 90%.

JUSTYNA

Justyna Wydrzyńska was arrested in November 2021 for posting a woman abortion pills to take at home. Aiding an abortion carries a potential sentence of up to three years in prison.

She attended her final day of court on

14 March this year dressed in a magenta suit and a gold necklace displaying the words "Mife/Miso", referring to the two drugs used for medical abortions, mifepristone and misoprostol. She was supported by Kinga Jelińska and Natalia Broniarczyk, with whom she had co-founded the activist group Abortion Dream Team (ADT). They were wearing matching jackets emblazoned with the slogan "Choose Life/Have an Abortion". Protestors gathered outside the court, waving placards that read "Jak Justyna" – "I Am Justyna".

Justyna never denied mailing the pill. Instead, her defence was that doing so was not a crime but an act of compassion; it was the state that was guilty. The woman she had sought to help had become dangerously ill while pregnant and had been admitted to hospital. When she expressed her concerns to her doctor, she was

dismissed. The woman discharged herself, intending to terminate her pregnancy. She was in an abusive relationship, with a controlling partner who did not want her to end the pregnancy. Here, Justyna got involved. She sent a small supply of mifepristone and misoprostol. The next day, she heard that the woman's partner had discovered the pills and called the police.

The trial has been widely criticised. The judge denied human rights groups access to the courtroom, but granted entry to a representative from extreme anti-abortion group Ordo Iuris, and allowed them to participate in the prosecution to represent the supposed interests of the foetus. The public prosecutor also filed motions against Justyna, accusing her of "indecent behaviour" outside of the courtroom. ADT made the most of the trial to raise awareness of the existence of abortion pills; they would regularly hold up boxes of mifepristone during press conferences.

The verdict was read out at just after 3pm on 14 March. The Abortion Dream Team were now wearing matching blazers adorned with silver sequins. Justyna was found guilty of both charges and sentenced to eight months community service, at 30 hours per week. The judge gave a heavier sentence than the one that the public prosecutor had requested. The woman that Justyna had sought to help ended up inducing a miscarriage using an unsafe method, leading to her hospitalisation and a serious infection. She eventually made a full recovery.

DOROTA AGNIESZKA IZABELA

Justyna was convicted in March. It didn't take long for another woman to pay the price for Poland's restrictive laws. In May, Dorota Lalik died in hospital. Five months pregnant, her waters broke. She was initially told that her pregnancy could be sustained and that her health was not in danger; the staff told her to lie with her legs up in the air so that the "waters might come back". She developed sepsis and her health deteriorated quickly. Dorota was eventually given an abortion, but too late: she died from septic shock and multiple organ failure that same day.

Abortion is still legal in cases where the pregnant person's life is at risk, but doctors are under a lot of pressure to delay performing the procedure. If a doctor is seen to perform an abortion unnecessarily, they will face three years in prison. Marta Lempart, from the All-Poland Women's Strike, said, "All pregnant women are in danger the moment they're referred to a Polish hospital. We are afraid of all doctors, because we don't know which ones will act to prevent their patient's death."

Situations like this are common. In January 2022, Agnieszka T died when a doctor refused her an abortion. She was pregnant with twins and one of the foetuses' heartbeats had stopped. According to information submitted to the European Parliament, five other women died that year in similar circumstances.

In September 2021, Izabela Sabjor died after being denied an abortion when her waters broke in the 22nd week of her pregnancy. The doctor refused to perform an abortion until the foetus' heartbeat had completely stopped, despite the fact that it was known that it was very unlikely to survive. Her sister testified at the European Parliament and said, "She knew she was being tortured, forced to wait for the foetus to die."

Abortion remains a decisive issue in Poland – recent polls suggest that more than two-thirds of the population support the liberalisation of abortion law. There is a lot of support for secularisation too, among young people especially. Many have been alienated by the Catholic Church's hardline approach to the abortion question, cover-ups of sexual abuse and its ongoing involvement in Polish politics, including its support of authoritarianism.

More powerful still, a recent poll by Amnesty International has found that 47 percent of people living in Poland said they would aid someone seeking an abortion in a similar situation to Justyna's; among young people, that figure rose to 66 percent. Despite the best efforts of the Polish state to intimidate, the public trial of Justyna has fired people up, garnered more support for abortion, and ensured that more people know where and how to access it safely.



THE FIGHT AGAINST SECTION 219a

GERMANY

JANA HÖSS

In Germany, abortion is covered by section 218 of the criminal code. It stands as an "offence against life", alongside murder and manslaughter. It is only exempt if it is carried out during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and if the woman has received counselling from an authorised advisor and has waited three days before the procedure. Until July 2022 a significant legal obstacle to abortion was section 219a of the criminal code. This law prohibited publicly offering, announcing, or advertising abortions.

In practice this meant that doctors

were prevented by law from informing patients that they were providing abortions or what kinds of procedures they were able to offer in any other form other than verbally and in person. Both the prohibition of abortion as such and the prohibition of "advertisement for abortion" are based on laws implemented in 1933, in the early stages of Nazi rule.

The practical result of section 219a was that people seeking medical professionals qualified to conduct abortions, for example through a Google search, were unable to find factual

information. Instead, they would usually find lists of doctors providing abortion exclusively through websites of anti-abortionists, who were looking to shame and doxx the doctors. Those seeking abortion would be subjected to a string of anti-abortion propaganda before they could even find a doctor qualified to conduct the procedure.

In 2017 Dr Kristina Hänel, a GP from Hesse was found to have violated paragraph 219a by including information on abortion on her website. She was sentenced to a €6.000 fine. There was huge public backlash and all political parties – except the governing CDU/CSU and the far right AFD – pledged to repeal the law. At the time, parties backing abortion reform held a majority of Bundestag seats, but the 2017 federal elections changed the situation overnight. The CDU and SPD formed a coalition, and in and amongst the horse-trading, the SPD dropped its pledge to get rid of section 219a.

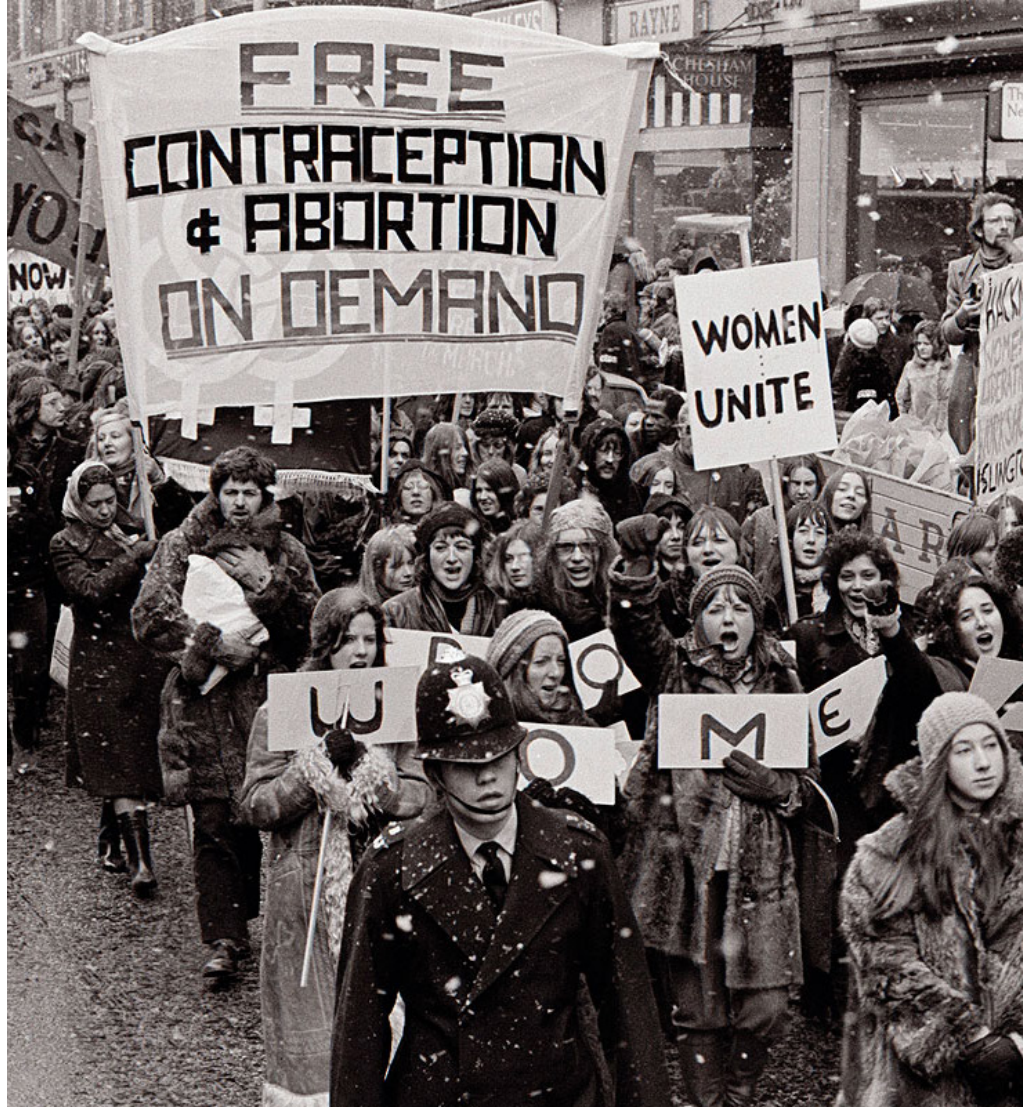
Dr. Hänel appealed the court decision and was sentenced again in 2018 and, following another appeal, again in 2019. The case sparked outrage among the general population and Dr. Hänel received widespread support, including petitions with hundreds of thousands of signatories and nationwide protests. As a result, the government decided on changes to section 219a, easing rather than ending the law. These changes were widely deemed inadequate and medical professionals continued to be investigated and sentenced for providing information. Doctors were still sentenced under the “new” 219a for including information about various possible procedures.

After sustained pressure, however, in 2022 the new government finally abolished paragraph 219a. Dr. Hänel and other medical practitioners sentenced under the old law have been exonerated.

FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM

We have a new Instagram account! Follow us for socialist feminist news and commentary and to stay up to date with our political activity.

📷 [womens.fightback](https://www.instagram.com/womens.fightback)



HISTORY

LESSONS FROM THE MOVEMENT

DANIELLE MAISE

The campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s which defeated a series of attacks on the 1967 Abortion Act offer a model that we can learn from.

In 1975, the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) was set up to campaign against the White Bill, the first in a series of Private Members' Bills in the 1970s and 80s which sought to reduce term limits. The NAC was made up of activists from the Women's Liberation Movement, the socialist left and the labour movement, and it had two aims: to defend the Abortion Act and win real reproductive freedom. The NAC was clear that abortion was a

class issue; they knew that to win, they needed to build a mass movement that was based in the organised working class.

That same year, the NAC held a trade union conference on abortion. NAC activists argued in their workplaces and in their union meetings that abortion rights were something that trade unions should fight for. They were operating in a labour movement that had considerably more conservative ideas about gender roles, family and abortion than today. Many unions were actively anti-abortion. There were many men who saw it as a private, personal matter, and “not their issue”. But persistent work by rank-and-file activists meant that those ideas started to change.

The 1975 Trades Union Congress voted for free abortion on request. Then, in 1979, the TUC organised a 60,000-strong demonstration in defence of abortion rights – quite remarkable when you think that today's TUC hasn't even organised a demonstration on pay, in the midst of the biggest strike wave

in decades! This was the first time the union movement in the UK organised a demonstration on women's issues, but it didn't happen by chance. Branch after branch, followed by a number of national union conferences, had called for it to happen.

There was a clear difference between the TUC's purely defensive slogan, 'Keep it safe, keep it legal', and the NAC's more radical, bodily autonomy-focused 'Free abortion on demand, for a woman's right to choose'. Activists in the NAC understood the importance of building the broadest possible campaign, while also continuing to raise more radical demands and build support for them in the movement.

The NAC organised in the Labour Party too, and in 1975 and 1977 conference voted for free abortion on demand in the NHS. Some Labour MPs ignored the conference decision – not much has changed there! – and voted for greater restrictions on abortion in Parliament. NAC activists pushed for votes on abortion in Parliament to no longer be taken as a free vote for MPs, arguing it should be voted on along class lines and not on the basis of individual conscience. This was defeated, with major unions voting against it.

In 1976, protestors occupied Westminster Cathedral and let off stink bombs in the House of Commons in opposition to the Benyon Bill, which sought to reduce the legal term limit from 24 to 20-weeks. In 1987, 20 years after the passing of the Abortion Act, the Alton Bill was submitted, seeking to reduce the legal term limit, this time from 24-weeks to 18. Once again, the NAC mobilised, creating the Fight Alton Bill campaign. FAB had local groups in almost every town and city, and co-ordinated another TUC-sponsored national demonstration. In both cases, they successfully fended off the Bills.

In 2003, the NAC merged with the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) to form Abortion Rights UK.

Now, our rights are again under attack. As we mobilise to defend ourselves, we should remember that, to some extent, we've been here before and won. And we should remember the lessons: mass working class mobilisation will be crucial in the battle ahead.

IN DEFENCE OF "PREGNANT PEOPLE"

In the wake of the imprisonment of Carla Foster a motion was put to Sheffield Heely Labour party for the decriminalisation of abortion.

The motion included the sentence "It is vital that Labour collectively support progressive legislative change, including decriminalisation and reform to allow women and pregnant people to control their own bodies," recognising that all pregnant people – including trans men and non-binary people – have a right to reproductive choice.

An amendment was put to delete the term "pregnant people", on the grounds that it could be seen as "offensive". The individual, of course, caveated this by saying they were not transphobic. They appealed for unity

• Pass our motion for the full decriminalisation of abortion in your Labour or trade union branch:
bit.ly/motion-abortiondecrim

around the "most important issue" of abortion rights. Fortunately, the amendment was defeated and the motion was passed.

Shamefully, however, a minority voted against the motion as a whole once it was clear it would include the term. This illustrates the lie that the issue for transphobes is the "clash of women's rights and trans rights." Where there was an opportunity to make a stand on women's rights and back trans rights, they chose their prejudice: the very definition of trans-exclusive.

A feminism that does not fight proactively for trans rights will leave women behind and become a defence campaign for those with the most power in our movement.





JINA MAHSA AMINI ONE YEAR ON

KELLY ROGERS

September marks one year since the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Iranian-Kurdish woman who was killed in detention following her arrest for allegedly violating Iran's compulsory hijab law. Her murder sparked the most significant protests against the Iranian regime since the 1980s and the strength of the uprising prompted the Iranian regime to take the notorious morality police off the streets.

CRACKDOWN

It has been confirmed that more than twenty thousand people have been

IRAN

arrested and hundreds killed in the subsequent crackdown, with the real number expected to be much higher. Sentences have been extremely harsh. At the time of writing, Iran Human Rights reports 464 executions so far in 2023, a sharp increase on previous years as the regime attempts to instill fear in political dissidents. Protestors have been taken through Iran's Revolutionary Courts, in trials blighted by gross miscarriages of justice, including confessions being extracted under torture. Many individuals remain in detention, charged with offences carrying the death penalty.

Women political prisoners report being raped by interrogators, attacked by fellow prisoners, and being denied medical treatment. Many have been moved to prisons outside of the capital city. It is believed that the regime may be looking to close down Evin prison in Tehran and then claim that Iran no longer detains political prisoners.

The Iranian regime is one of the worst in the world for freedom of the press, and since the beginning of the uprising dozens of journalists have been detained. Niloofar Hamedi and Elaheh Mohammed were the first two reporters to be arrested in September 2022. They were charged with "conspiracy and rebellion against national security" and "anti-state propaganda" — charges once again carrying a possible death

penalty. Their trials took place in the Tehran Revolutionary Court in July, behind closed doors, and they were both denied access to legal representation. Other journalists report being beaten in custody, receiving death threats, being followed, and receiving threats that their close family members will be raped or killed. At the time of writing, 26 journalists are detained in Iranian prisons.

Thousands of schoolgirls have been hospitalised following reports of mass poisonings. The first cases came from the city of Qom, in November, at the height of the wave of street protests. Ali Pourtabatabaei, who reported on the Qom poisonings, is one of the journalists that remains in detention. The poisonings are widely believed to be a punishment for the women and girl-led uprising, committed either by the government or by far right groups in Iran.

Despite this brutal crackdown, a lasting legacy of the protests has been continued defiance from Iranian women and girls, especially when it comes to wearing the hijab. Images and footage of women removing their headscarves feature regularly on social media, as well as on the streets of Tehran, and it's estimated that 10 percent of Iranian women do not cover their hair. At the time of writing, the anniversary of

Jina Mahsa Amini is drawing closer, and the regime is pre-emptively arresting large numbers of women's rights activists in an attempt to stall a new wave of protests.

SEPIDEH GHOLIAN

Sepideh Gholian is a prominent 28-year old workers' rights activist and a political prisoner in Iran. She was jailed in 2018 for supporting the Workers' Union of Haft Tappeh sugar cane workers' strike.

She was originally arrested along with more than a dozen other activists, union organisers and workers. They reported being beaten, whipped, and threatened with sexual assault whilst being held. Most were released after a short period, but Sepideh was only let go after a full month in detention.

Her freedom was short-lived. Iranian state television aired footage which seemed to show Sepideh confessing to taking part in a Western-backed campaign to overthrow the government. She countered these accusations on social media, declaring that she had been beaten and forced to make a false confession. She was imprisoned for a further four years.

On 15 March she was released again, and in an incredibly courageous act of resistance, she immediately staged a powerful one-woman protest outside the prison gates. Hair uncovered, carrying a bunch of flowers, smiling, she was recorded shouting "Khamenei [Ali Khamenei, Iran's so-called Supreme Leader], the tyrant, we'll drag you into the ground!" and demanding the release of other political prisoners.

Sepideh was rearrested that same day, and now faces a further two years in prison. In July, she was removed from court during a public session of her trial because she refused to wear a "chador", a full-body cloak that reveals only the face. Her trial has been suspended.

RESISTANCE

The protests rumble on in Iran in fits and bursts. The strength of the uprising last year initially forced authorities to capitulate to the pressure of the protestors, at least in practice. For 10 months the morality police stopped patrolling the streets.

This year has also seen a wave of strikes. Inflation in Iran has been

running at approximately 50% for several years now. Widespread anti-regime sentiment and a collapsing economy prompted workers from energy, steel, petrochemical and other industries to strike. Workers in more than 80 companies joined the action, striking against poor working conditions, job insecurity, low wages, and rising living costs.

The hijab remains the symbol of the uprising; the pinnacle of decades of oppression under a clerical-fascist regime. But the protests have always been about more than just reforming the compulsory hijab law – the Iranian people are demanding the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. An opinion survey of 158,000 Iranians conducted in late December 2022 showed that 81% rejected the Islamic state. Of these, 40% believe it should be replaced by a democratic republic and 22% by a constitutional monarchy.

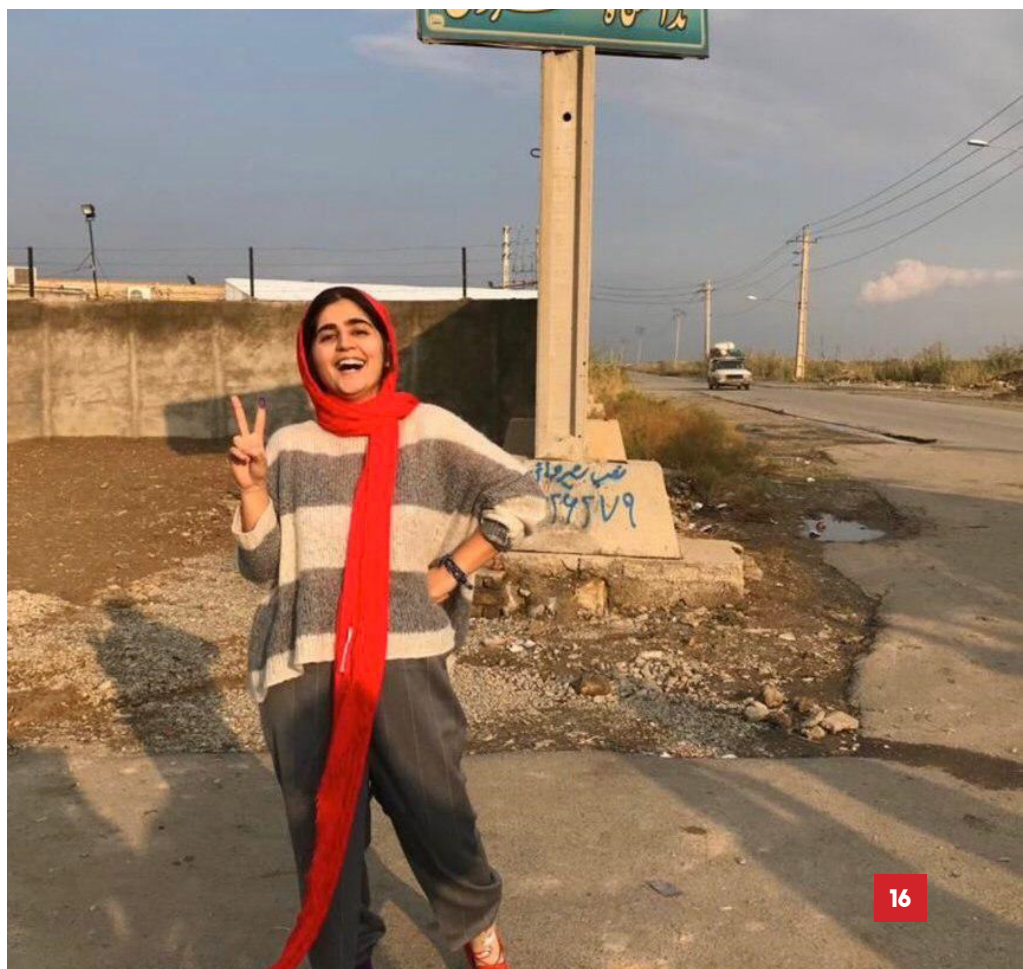
In February a number of leftist, feminist and student organisations and worker unions joined together to issue a statement against the regime. Among their demands was the call for: the immediate release of all political prisoners and abolition of the death penalty; for a free press and freedom of assembly; for free trade unions; for full equality for women and the abolition of law that discriminates against women

and LGBTQ+ people; for a secular state and an end to discrimination based on religion or ethnicity; for an immediate increase in wages and improvement in working conditions; and the expropriation of wealth in order to fund education and other public services. The statement shows the potential for a new, democratic society that can be built if the Iranian people succeed in overthrowing the Islamic Republic. We stand with them every step of the way.

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- Follow the Solidarity with the Iranian Workers' Movement Committee: www.swiw.org

The aims of the Committee are to mobilise union and labour groups in support of the uprising and workers' protests in Iran and in opposition to the human rights violations and executions. The Committee is chaired by John McDonnell MP and consists of Iranian women's rights activists and delegates from trade unions and Iranian and Kurdish groups. Workers' Liberty also sends a delegate.

- Pass our motion in your Labour or trade union branch, calling for the release of Sepideh Gholian and all political prisoners in Iran: bit.ly/freesepideh-motion





ONLY YES MEANS YES

TYRONE FALLS

New sexual consent legislation came into effect in Spain in October 2022 – “La Ley de Garantía Integral de la Libertad Sexual” – stating that sexual consent must be explicit and cannot be assumed to have been given. Previously, victims of sexual abuse, harassment and violence had to prove violence, threat of violence or coercion, or demonstrate that they had resisted the perpetrator.

Under this new law, popularly known as the “Only Yes Means Yes” law (“La Ley del Solo sí es sí”), various lesser crimes have been recategorised as sexual assault. A range of behaviour that previously was not criminalised will also now be recognised as such. This includes: use of digital violence (e.g. non-consensually sharing sexual

images of the person), use of drugs and alcohol to facilitate sexual assault, and street harassment (i.e. provocative comments, whistling or gestures).

The impetus for the legislation came from two high-profile rape cases in Spain in 2016 and 2020, and feminist mobilisations in response to them.

In 2016, five men who raped an 18-year-old woman in Pamplona during a popular bull-running festival were acquitted. The case (popularly referred to as “the wolf pack”) and the subsequent court decision sparked outrage across Spain. In particular, protestors were furious that the courts had found that video footage showing the victim unmoving and with her eyes closed proved that there was consent.

SPAIN

One of the men accused was a member of the Civil Guard and another a member of the Spanish Army. In 2019, after widespread mass demonstrations, the decision was reversed. The five men were charged with rape and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

A year later, in Catalonia, a 14 year-old girl was gang-raped by a group of men. Because the girl was intoxicated and did not (indeed was not in a state to) fight back, the courts ruled the men were only guilty of the lesser crime of sexual abuse. The courts ruled categorically that it was not rape.

In 2021, the number of rape cases increased by 34% compared to the previous year. The Interior Ministry estimates that in 2022 around 2,870 rapes took place, an increase of 53% compared to 2019 (this amounts to just under eight women raped every day, and the actual number is very likely higher). Close to 1-in-10 women over the age of 16 have suffered sexual assault by either a partner or an ex-partner over the course of their lives. In September 2019, mass demonstrations took place after 19 women were killed by current or former partners over that summer. According to a study carried out by four Spanish public universities, in 80% of sexual assault cases the victim knows the perpetrator and 60% occur in the

victim's home.

CLUMSY LAWS OR RIGHT WING JUDGES?

The new law has faced criticism, however. Besides recategorising a range of behaviour as sexual assault, it also reduced the minimum and maximum jail sentences for those crimes. As a result, many prisoners have been able to reduce their sentences on appeal. The government (a coalition between social democrats PSOE and left-wing Unidos Podemos) argue that the loophole has only been interpreted in such a way because Spain's judiciary is largely controlled by the right. How much this is due to judicial conservatism as opposed to carelessness on the part of the coalition government is unclear. One suspects it is a combination of both.

The coalition government is divided on how to resolve the issue. Unidos Podemos (UP) argues that the law as it exists does not require amendments, whereas the PSOE argues that further "technical adjustments" are required (some in the party have even gone so far as to say they will recruit support from the centre-right party Partido Popular, if need be). By April this year, 104 offenders had been released and a further 978 had their sentences reduced, according to government data. While there is a case to be made for focusing less on prison and criminalisation to tackle gender-based violence, this would be an extremely clumsy way of going about it.

A CLEAR STEP FORWARD

Beyond enshrining the need for explicit consent, the law also mandates sexual education at all stages of the education system and investment in public 24-hour crisis centres. While these are both positive developments, the details of both and the level of financial backing for them is unclear.

Spain has recently made progress in other areas of gender equality (e.g. narrowing the gender pay gap) and has passed some other progressive legislation, allowing anyone over the age of 16 to change their legally registered gender; easing restrictions for young people accessing abortion; and introducing paid menstrual leave. In spite of this, much of what makes people vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence — low pay, precarious

immigration status, and rising rents and house prices — persist or are getting worse.

In the next couple of years, we will see how this law is enforced in the real world. All things considered, it is a significant step forward. Having the state recognise that a range of behaviour is sexual assault even if it does not involve violence, the threat of violence, or resistance on the part of the victim is significant. The law provides support to those fighting sexual violence, workplace sexual harassment, and domestic violence. In particular, the promise of an expanded

network of crisis support centres should be pushed to ensure that they are well-funded, democratically controlled, integrated into the wider public health system and easily accessible even to those living in rural or suburban areas. Likewise, the mandate for expanded sex education should be pushed to be LGBTQ-inclusive, as well as including discussions on consent and pornography.

It remains to be seen what the lasting, concrete results of this legislation will be. Ultimately, it will depend on the Spanish feminist movement and the Spanish left.

CASTE, CLASS & RAPE

INDIA

JILL MOUNTFORD

In May this year, two women were stripped naked and dragged through the streets of Imphal, the capital of Manipur state, before being gang raped by a mob of men. The backdrop to this incident is the ongoing ethnic violence between the Meitei people, who are the majority in Manipur, and the Kuki-Zo tribe, a minority. So far, over 130 people have died in the conflict and more than 35,000 have been displaced from their homes. It was Meitei men who raped two Kuki women.

Rape is the fourth most common crime against women in India, the weapon of choice for some men. Women and girls from Adivasi (indigenous Indians) and Dalit communities (once known as the 'untouchables') are almost twice as likely to be the victims of rape and violence. According to Dr Suraj Yengde, author of *Caste Matters* (2019), "The Dalit female... is a victim of the cultures, structures and institutions of oppression, both externally and

internally. This manifests in perpetual violence against Dalit women."

The National Crime Records Bureau's latest data shows there was a 45% increase in reported rapes of Dalit women between 2015 and 2021. Official statistics record that four Dalit women and girls are raped every day in India, though real numbers are thought to be much higher. Research carried out by the Dalit-led women's group, the Swabhimani Society, says that 10 Dalit women were raped every day in India in 2021.

Rape is a weapon used against Dalit women and girls to keep the Dalit community in its place. And there are, of course, patriarchal structures and attitudes within the Dalit community itself. The rape of Dalit women and girls will often be "settled" outside of the judicial system, as perpetrators apply economic and social pressure on victims and their families.

According to Deepa Narayan, author of *Chup: Breaking the Silence of India's Women* (2018), the oppression of Indian women "starts innocuously: it occurs in private life, within families, with girls being locked up in their own homes. This everyday violence is the product of a culture that bestows all power on men, and that does not even want women to exist."

Kidnapping and abduction is the most common crime against women in India, followed by domestic violence from a husband and his relatives. Also shockingly common are "dowry deaths".

6,975 women were killed in India in 2022 because their dowry was regarded as insufficient by the husband and his family, this despite the fact that dowries have been illegal in India for more than sixty years.

Incidents of rape, murder and sexual violence regularly spark mass protests. The International Dalit Solidarity Network points out that "Dalit women activists are increasingly standing up for their rights. Numerous campaign groups organise protest marches, document and publicise atrocities, and offer their support to Dalit women. Such activities are not without risk as the response from dominant castes against Dalits fighting for their human rights can be brutal".

For many Dalit feminist activists, frustration is common. Manisha Mashaal, from the Swabhimaan Society, says: "Forget getting justice, so many cases of violence against us are not even acknowledged. It makes my blood boil to see how we still have to fight for

these basic rights".

Deepa Narayan's book, on the other hand, is a call to women in her own class — in her own words, the middle and upper classes — to stir themselves into action and break their silence on sexual violence and rape. "We need to talk about ourselves," she writes, "and not just 'them', those poor, uneducated women out there".

But large-scale, rapid change will only come about when women in fields and factories are stirred into action, when their voices are raised and their oppressors forced to listen.

• Further reading: *Chup: Breaking the Silence about India's Women*, by Deepa Narayan (2018); *Caste Matters*, by Suraj Yende (2019)

HISTORY

QUEER LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION

MICHAEL BAKER

In May 1934, Joseph Stalin received a letter from a Scottish communist called Harry Whyte. Whyte was a journalist, working for the USSR's English-language paper in Moscow. He was also a gay man whose boyfriend had recently gone missing. His letter opened with a question, whose answer would shape the future of the Soviet gay community: "can a homosexual be considered a worthy member of the Communist Party?"

Whyte's decision to move to the Soviet Union in 1932 had partly been an attempt to escape Scotland's anti-sodomy laws. The world's first socialist state had removed all homophobic laws, allowing gay people to live, and love, freely. He moved to Moscow, taking a job as a journalist at the Moscow Daily News. After a year or so, he had ingratiated himself with the local queer community and took an active part in the city's blossoming gay culture. He went on a string of dates with a young man called Ivan. Then, one morning in early 1934, Ivan failed to show up at the time they'd agreed to meet. After a couple of weeks, Whyte checked with Ivan's sister, who had heard nothing from him either.

Through his press connections, he got access to the text of a new law recriminalising sodomy. This was passed in March 1934, but the change had not been publicly announced. Whyte's letter to Stalin was not a personal plea for the leader to do him a favour. It was a rigorous justification for the existence of homosexuality, arguing that it was a natural state of being for some men, and that there was no reason for socialists to consider it a crime.

Whyte cited the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, which declared



homosexuality an "incurable condition" and shamed Western capitalist states for punishing homosexuals; he referred to conversations with two different psychiatrists, both of whom agreed that as his sexuality was "incurable", he required no treatment and deserved no punishment; he outlined the reasoning behind homophobic oppression under capitalism, which he saw as rooted in the need to always produce a "reserve army of labour" through a strictly policed nuclear family; he even quoted from Engels' letters, in which Engels commented on contemporary gay scandals amongst English and German aristocrats. Whyte pointed out that one of the very founders of Marxism drew a strict distinction between the deplorable practices of the bourgeoisie who happen to be gay, and the seemingly harmless, cross-class practice of men having sex with other men.

Whyte received no response to his letter. The article in the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* was soon updated, describing homosexuality as "shameful and criminal", and "revealing the decay of the ruling classes". Maksim Gorky wrote an editorial for Pravda with an infamous promise: "eradicate all homosexuals and fascism will vanish". Whyte was not "eradicated"; he returned to live in Scotland in 1936. After the Soviet Union's collapse in the 1990s, researchers discovered his letter in the newly-opened Soviet state archives. Across the first page is a handwritten note: "Archive this. Idiot and degenerate. Joseph Stalin."

FROM FREE LOVE TO "PLESHKIS"

The letter marks the most significant change in the history of gay oppression in the Soviet Union. Homosexuality was not a major issue within the early Bolshevik party, but arguments around it had been discussed. Most notably, Alexandra Kollontai argued for decriminalisation on the basis of "free love". After the revolution, the rewriting of the legal code removed the anti-sodomy law, but there is little evidence of any internal discussion on this decision. Regardless, this began a period of freedom for homosexual men and women that was impressively ahead of its time. The Soviet Union's legalisation of abortion in the same period was similarly progressive.



• Maksim Gorky & Joseph Stalin in the Red Square, Moscow, 1931.

Recriminalisation likely came as a result of pressure from the top of the OGPU (secret police, later known as the NKVD, then eventually the KGB). Head of the OGPU Genrikh Yagoda wrote to Stalin in September 1933 warning that groups of gay men were a dangerous weak point for Nazi espionage (ignoring the incredibly vicious persecution of both homosexuals and transsexuals in Nazi Germany). Yagoda encouraged Stalin to reintroduce the Tsarist sodomy law; Stalin did so just 6 months later.

While "Destalinisation" under Nikita Khrushchev led to several laws being repealed, article 121, criminalising sex between men, was deliberately kept. The law used the somewhat archaic Russian word *muzhelozhstvo*, "man-laying". There are documented cases of lesbians escaping conviction in Soviet courts by arguing that they could not be guilty of 'man-laying' if there were, by definition, no men involved. Most, particularly gay men, weren't so lucky. By one estimate, over 38,000 men were sentenced under article 121 during the USSR's existence.

Legal persecution and complete state control of all media meant that queer life was defined by secrecy and private networks. As in other countries, gay men largely found people to sleep with by cruising, in locations that gained the underground nickname 'pleshki'. Well-known pleshki included the fountains in Moscow between the Bolshoi Theatre and the statue of Karl Marx, and St. Petersburg's Anichkov Bridge, at the top of Nevsky Prospect. The latter had earned itself the nickname 'the bridge of eighteen testicles': eight on the horse statues that adorned each corner, eight on the men riding them, and two on the policeman who stood on round-the-clock guard to watch out for any untoward behaviour.

Wherever and whenever they are used, cruising spots have to fulfil a double role: an innocent meeting place or tourist attraction to the general public, but also a location to scout out other queer people and establish a more intimate connection for those 'in the know'. This inevitably carries risk, as

evidenced by the much higher rate of arrests for sodomy or public indecency around famous pleshki in large cities.

With no form of publicly visible representation, and almost no record of their own history, queer Soviet people were left to build records and histories of their own. Popular gays of the past included the composer Tchaikovsky and communist French novelist Andre Gide, as well as more debatably queer figures like William Shakespeare (Harry Whyte mentions all three in his letter to Stalin). Contemporary celebrities were constantly identified as potential gays.

Stage singer Vadim Kozin, for example, was one of the early Soviet Union's biggest celebrities, a diva famous for singing love songs and refusing to perform at the drop of a hat. A hugely popular figure, Kozin was able to flaunt his homosexuality more than most, inviting young men to his hotel rooms after shows with seeming impunity. In 1944, he was invited to an interview with Lavrentiy Beria, head of the NKVD, to ask why none of his songs were about Stalin. His answer was not satisfactory, and he spent the next 5 years in a Gulag in Magadan, performing for inmates and officers alike.

AGITATION AND TENTATIVE PROGRESS

Queer life remained secretive and quiet until the 1980s, at which point a combination of factors (the relative laxity of the Communist Party, the first signs of a Soviet civil society, and

pressure from a young international gay movement) brought a movement to life. Gay-specific publications (the most famous were called *Tema*, *Argot* and *RISK*) began to be printed and sold on the streets. Newly-founded NGOs established connections with Scandinavia, Western Europe, and America. Brave individual activists started building networks and increasing their activity, agitating for reform and legalisation. One figure central to the queer political revival of this period was lesbian activist Masha Gessen, now a famous anti-Putin writer and columnist for the New Yorker.

This agitation had its limits: the movement was extremely young and small, and often dependent on funding from more established American NGOs, who paid little attention to local issues. The community had spent 60 years unable to discuss burning questions, which meant that the movement that emerged was fractious, with conservative elements constantly pushing back on demands they thought would alienate wider Soviet society. They faced considerable public backlash: in 1989, a survey by the Levada Centre found that just over a third of Soviet citizens supported "liquidating" homosexuals.

In 1993, Boris Yeltsin decriminalised homosexuality in the Russian Federation. The 1990s saw a slow process of the Russian gay community building itself up, developing a culture somewhat analogous to Western

European nations. The process by which Putin has vilified and attacked the country's modern queer community is a topic for another article, but for many of Russia's older queer people, the circumstances they now find themselves in is one that may feel a little familiar: they gather amongst themselves, build small communities of resistance, holding onto contact with the outside world, and battling against an ever-increasing regime of repression and imprisonment.

As socialists, as feminists, as internationalist gays the world over, our job is to remember the roots of queer oppression and the lives lived under it. We stand in the tradition of those, from Harry Whyte onwards, who have stood strong in the face of that oppression.

• Further reading: Dan Healey's *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* (2001) and *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (2017) are must-reads on LGBT Russian history. Other important research includes Rustam Alexander's *Red Closet: The Hidden History of Gay Oppression in the USSR* (2023) and Laurie Essig's *Queer in Russia* (1999).

• Workers' Liberty has republished a translation of Harry Whyte's letter to Stalin in full on our website, with an explanatory introduction: bit.ly/harrywhyte-letter

• Masha Gessen at their apartment in Moscow in the early 90s.



LARISA REISNER

A BOLSHEVIK, REVOLUTIONARY LIFE

ELLIE ROBINSON

• *Larisa Reisner; A Biography*, by Cathy Porter (Brill, 2023)

Larisa Reisner (1895-1926) lived an extraordinary life. She fought for working-class socialism at its high point a century ago, but died just before Stalin snuffed out the workers' state she had fought to defend. Cathy Porter's newly updated *Larisa Reisner: A Biography* captures Reisner's passion and sheds new light on her life.

EARLY LIFE

Larisa Reisner was born on 2 May 1895 in Lublin, then in tsarist Poland. (Both her names are often misspelt with two "ss".) In 1898, her father Mikhail Reisner was exiled to Siberia for his political activities and for the next five years the family lived in the city of Tomsk. Between 1903 and 1907, they lived in exile in Berlin, where Larisa regarded leading German Social Democratic Party (SPD) figures such as Julie Bebel, Sophie Borisovna and Karl Liebknecht as aunts and uncles.

In 1912, Larisa Reisner left school and entered St Petersburg University, wrote poetry and threw herself into the city's bohemian nightlife. Her circle's motto was: "We are bohemians, restless, rootless, turbulent, forever seeking and not finding, creating new idols, and abandoning them in the name of a new god."

RUSSIA IN REVOLUTION

In March 1917, Larisa Reisner joined the educational programme of the Petrograd Soviet, teaching literacy and literature in the workers' clubs. At Red Kronstadt, she met Fyodor Raskolnikov and gave literature classes on ships and in the

sailors' clubs.

There are several accounts of Reisner's activities on the night the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917. In one account, she sailed to Petrograd with Raskolnikov and the sailors on the battleship Aurora and it was she who gave the orders for the cannon blanks to be fired at the Winter Palace. Another claimed she joined the detachment of Red Guards who stormed the Peter and Paul Fortress. A friend reported that she presented herself for duty to the Bolshevik Central Committee, huddled in a small side room in the Smolny. When asked "What can you do, comrade?" replied, "I can fight, ride, write reports from the front, and if necessary die".

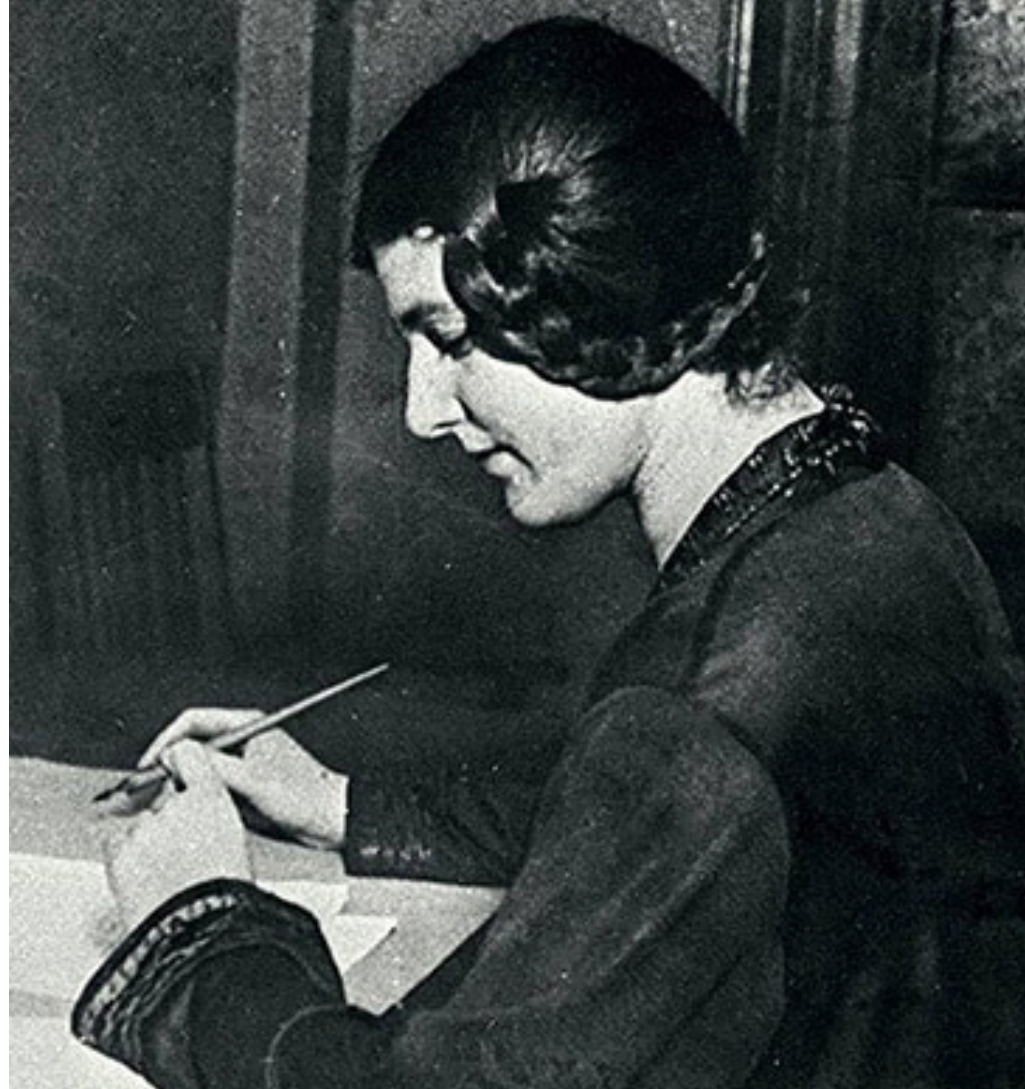
In October 1917, she worked with the Bolshevik government, first at the Commissariat of Education, then at the Commissariat of Naval Affairs. In spring 1918 she joined the Bolshevik Party and in May, married Raskolnikov in a new state "red wedding" ceremony.

RUSSIA – CIVIL WAR

Reisner made her mark during the Russian Civil War. In late July 1918, she

joined a detachment of sailors on the two hundred-mile train journey to form a new naval flotilla on the Volga river. In August-September 1918 Reisner participated in the first, critical military turning point of the civil war. Its fate was decided at Svyazhsk, where a few hundred Bolshevik volunteers defended the bridgehead over the Volga, barring the Czech Legion's access to the river route from Kazan to Nizhny Novgorod, and the railway line to Moscow. She summed up the spirit of the fighting:

"Svyazhsk was the furnace in which the nucleus of the Red Army was forged, at the height of the retreat and panic, the crossroads from which the tide of the revolutionary offensive began to roll in all directions... this Svyazhsk where not one soldier fought under compulsion, where everything that was alive was fighting to defend the Revolution, bound together by voluntary ties of discipline in a struggle that had seemed too hopeless at the outset... Those who slept on the station floor, in straw littered with broken glass, were afraid of nothing. No one asked when it would end. Tomorrow didn't exist, there was only a brief hot smoky today, and we lived for it as we



live at harvest time... The days seemed so rich, so utterly unlike previous life. As soon as one passed it seemed like a miracle. And it was a miracle...

Reisner wrote of Trotsky's miracles of leadership and organisation at Svyazhsk, "refusing to yield an inch, inspiring fighters with his ruthless authority and icy calm". She wrote:

But there is another force in revolutionary war, without which victory is impossible, and that is the romanticism of the Revolution, which inspires people to throw themselves straight from the barricades of 1917 into the harsh discipline of the army, without losing the light step learnt from street battles and political demonstrations, or the quick thinking gained from decades in the underground. It means swimming against the tide, beating back the exhaustion of the four years of war and the stormy waters of the Revolution... Ultimately it's the revolutionary instinct that is the supreme judge. Trotsky possesses this instinct. The revolutionary in him is never pushed aside by the soldier, the leader, the commander.

The day after the battle for Svyazhsk, Trotsky ordered the soldiers who had deserted to be arrested. 27 were shot, including eight Bolsheviks. Reisner argued that it was necessary, in order to forge the "iron spirit" of the Red Army.

The night after the executions, she joined Trotsky and Raskolnikov on the destroyer *Endurance*, at the head of a squadron of gunboats sailing with their lights out in battle formation to Kazan. Slipping through the narrow entrance to the harbour, they fired at a caravan of fuel barges, which went up in flames. The Whites fired back, grazing the *Endurance's* bows and broke its rudder chain, causing it to ram one of its own gunboats. But engineers managed to repair the damage and the squadron returned without losses.

In December 1918, Reisner was appointed as the Red Navy's first woman political commissar. She spent two years as cavalry instructor, flag-secretary, war correspondent and reconnaissance officer, fighting in the battles for Kazan and Tsaritsyn, Astrakhan and Azerbaijan, pushing herself to the limit, enduring danger, hunger and exhaustion.

AFGHANISTAN

Reisner's next assignment was in Afghanistan, the key to Soviet Russia's complicated relations with British imperial power in Asia. Between 1921 and 1923, she was a member of the first Soviet diplomatic mission in Kabul, with Raskolnikov serving as ambassador.

Reisner's relationship with Raskolnikov deteriorated during these years. Reisner told her friend Elisabeth Poretsky that while in Afghanistan, Raskolnikov had abused, humiliated and beaten her. She told how he reported her to Moscow for conducting her intelligence work with the British "naked, at their quarters, covered only in a fur coat", and she had been reprimanded for "behaviour unbecoming to a Party member". "She said he was insanely jealous and terribly violent", Poretsky wrote, "and she showed me the vicious scar he had made on her back with his riding crop".

Reisner suffered two miscarriages in Kabul. She left Afghanistan in May 1923 without Raskolnikov, three and a half months pregnant. In September, she was rushed to hospital in Moscow and had a third miscarriage. She divorced Raskolnikov.

GERMANY

In Autumn 1923, mass strikes seemed to be taking Germany close to revolution. Reisner was sent to live there illegally, with false papers, sharing the underground lives of workers in Berlin and Hamburg. She reported on Hamburg's crushed communist-led uprising and the fight against Hitler's fascists. She worked for Comintern secretary Karl Radek and began a

romantic relationship with him.

After the uprising was defeated, in the second week of November, Radek sent her to Hamburg. At the end of November, she left Hamburg and returned with Radek to Moscow. She worked on her Hamburg writings, studying trial records, corresponding with those still there, checking her material with them and with the exiled Hans Kippenberger. The first complete edition of *Hamburg at the Barricades* was published in December 1923 in German and a few weeks later in Russian. She also published a collection of articles titled *Berlin, October 1923*. This all took place in the midst of passionate debate about the mistakes made in Germany and who was responsible. This debate formed part of the emerging conflict between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky.

Reisner returned to Germany as a journalist in 1925, travelling across the country reporting on workers' lives under the new president, Field Marshal von Hindenburg.

RUSSIA

In January 1924, Lenin died. Reisner wrote an obituary 'Tomorrow We Must Live, Today We Grieve'. Between May and October that year, Reisner spent five months travelling around the industrial heartlands of the Urals and Eastern Ukraine, living with workers' families, joining them on their shifts in the mines and factories, reporting on their achievements, sacrifices and suffering in building the new Soviet economy. In December 1924, she published her book, *Coal Iron and Living People*, describing

-
- Larisa Reisner's funeral, 1926



her travels. Reisner also reported for *Pravda* on the conference of the Communist Women's International, on its campaigns against fascism and for women's reproductive rights.

CENSORSHIP & MYTHS

Reisner died on 9 February 1926, three months before her 31st birthday. She received an official funeral, but her association with Trotsky and Radek meant she would soon disappear, as the Stalinists strengthened their grip on power.

In other cases, Reisner was denigrated. In the memoirs of Red Army commander Alexander Boyarchikov, once a Left Oppositionist, broken in the gulag, she was depicted as a scheming sex maniac and demented stalker of Trotsky. All this nonsense is repeated as fact by feted historian Robert Service in his 2009 biography of Trotsky.

ASSESSMENT

Better the verdict of fellow revolutionaries. Radek wrote:

She hated everyday philistinism, she wasn't interested in accumulating things or settling down, she didn't want to sink into dull routine. As an artist and fighter for the Revolution, she could always find in life's prose the lofty, the gripping, the substantive, the great.

Trotsky too was effusive, calling her "this Pallas [titan] of the revolution". He wrote in *My Life*:

Larisa Reisner... was herself prominent in the Fifth Army, as well as in the revolution as a whole. This fine young woman flashed across the revolutionary sky like a burning meteor, blinding many. With her appearance of an Olympian goddess, she combined a subtle and ironical mind and the courage of a warrior... She was anxious to know and to see all, and to take part in everything. In a few brief years, she became a writer of the first rank.

Porter's book is the best English language account of Reisner's life, although it is marred by a bizarre five-page rant (p.296-301) about a US proxy war with Russia over Ukraine. Porter is planning to publish an English translation of Reisner's books next year, so activists can read her writings first hand. We need more young socialists like Larisa Reisner.



• Mary Macarthur addressing a mass meeting in London, 1908.

HOW BERMONDSEY'S WOMEN JOINED THE GREAT UNREST

HISTORY

JILL MOUNTFORD

"Wild factory girls... half-drunk and yelling the lowest music hall songs, and dancing like wild creatures". So said the Bermondsey Parish magazine in 1900.

Such sententious accounts of young working-class women's behaviour were widespread as women gained limited independence through factory work. In the workplace they were seen as "cheap and docile labour", and in the trade union movement they were largely invisible. Will Thorne, a leading trade unionist at the time, declared

that "women do not make good trade unionists." And yet, the young factory women of Bermondsey, in the hot August of 1911, were anything but docile.

The working conditions for the women in the factories were overcrowded and dangerous, matched by appallingly low pay and precarious contracts. Their health and safety were of little or no consequence to the bosses and their managers, who considered injury to be a part of the job. Serious cuts, and the

infections that followed, plagued the women making tin containers. Cheap glass jars in the jam factories regularly exploded, maiming and even blinding the workers as they filled the jars with boiling hot jam.

This was The Great Unrest, a period of high class struggle in the years just before the First World War. The women of Bermondsey were not short of reasons to take action, and they did so. Around 15,000 low-paid women workers downed tools, walking out of the factories and onto the streets.

Hundreds of thousands of workers were already striking nationwide, and the ruling class was growing increasingly nervous. The government deployed troops and gunboats in Liverpool. Philip Gibbs, a journalist at the time, said the transport strike in Liverpool was "as near to revolution as anything I have seen in England".

THE SWEET SMELL OF STRUGGLE

Bermondsey was a poor working-class area dominated by low skilled work and low wages. Many men worked in the docks as casual labourers, some for private employers and others for the Port of London Authority (PLA). Dockers working for the PLA often worked as many as 84 hours a week and for less than the "dockers' tanner" (sixpence) per hour. In July 1911, growing discontent over wages and working hours resulted in more than 20,000 dockers and carmen in Bermondsey walking out.

The Bermondsey women strikers worked mainly, but not solely, in the food processing factories that had evolved around the docks in the late nineteenth century. The sweet aromas of custard, biscuits and jam filled the air, replacing the repugnant odours from the tanneries. Rotting carcasses softened with urine and dung used in the leather-making process had overpowered the atmosphere in this part of south east London since the 1790s.

No sooner had the dockers returned to work did the women in Pinks' Jam Factory take to the streets in a spontaneous demonstration on Saturday 12 August. By Monday 14 August a further 14,000 women and girls walked out of their workplaces, all calling for a pay rise. Unrestrained

by union rules and bureaucracy, the women's strikes had an air of carnival and theatre about them.

In his book *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935), George Dangerfield captured the spirit of the women: "As they went through the streets, shouting and singing, other women left their factories and workshops and came pouring out to join them . . . Many of them, dressed in all their finery, defied the phenomenal temperature with feather boas and fur tippets, as though their strike were some holiday of the soul, long overdue."

The women adapted the words of a popular music hall song *Fall In and Follow Me* as they paraded past factories urging other women to join them. The boss of Pinks' Jam Factory claimed that his workers had been "well contented" until they were "called out by the mob". In response, strikers at Pinks unfurled a banner saying, "Not White Slaves but Pink Slaves". (The term white slavery was commonly used, often as part of a moral panic at the time, to describe women and girls involved in sex work).

ORGANISING THE MOVEMENT

Mary MacArthur, of the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), quickly threw herself into supporting the Bermondsey women. At a rally in Southwark Park on Monday 14 August, MacArthur and Ben Tillet, of the National Federation of Transport Workers, spoke to a crowd of over 10,000 strikers. Not long after, the army was instructed to set up camp in Southwark Park in the "interests of public order": class battle

lines were laid out for all to see.

MacArthur helped the strikers to formulate their demands. She got them raising funds, and organising picket lines, rallies and marches. Within a week they had raised £500 and six barrels of herrings! By the end of that same week, 4,000 women had joined the NFWW. By the end of the strikes, that number had swelled to 8,000.

The solidarity and activism of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was essential. The party's offices on Fort Road became the strike headquarters, as it did for all the local strikes between July and September 1911. Prominent ILP women – among them Ada Slater, Eveline Lowe and Marion Phillips – distributed bread and groceries worth five shillings a week to strikers and their families.

The Bermondsey women's strikes involved over twenty workplaces and thousands of un-unionised women. They were all over by 8 September, with many of the bosses having conceded pay rises within a week. All but three workplaces won more money. Some factories won an extra 2 shillings a week, others a shilling; piece workers won an increase of threepence per hour; tinbox workers won a minimum wage of ten shillings a week.

These young working-class women had been dismissed and disrespected by their bosses and excluded from the organised labour movement. But the "wild factory girls" of Bermondsey learned to take themselves, and their collective power, seriously. So should we.

• Mary MacArthur addressing the crowd in Cradley Heath during the women chainmakers' strike of 1910.



NADIA DREWS

POETRY

Describing herself as having been "brought up by women with house bricks in their handbags", London-based poet Nadia Drews says that she "has always known femininity with a hard edge when unclasped". Her poems, she says, are like the girls she grew up with, bleeding but bolshy.

Nadia's poems have been published in various fanzines. She is a regular performer on picket lines and at fundraising gigs organised by Poetry on the Picket Line.

CASSIE CLUSKY

Cassie Clusky's come for tea
It's okay 'cos she's asked her mum
Her mum says 'get home 'fore it's dark'
That's when the bad lads with slavering dogs come

They'll bite yer

Cassie Clusky's come for tea
I told her we'd have chips and egg
You nick a crispy one from me
Her mum says she's got hollow legs

Full of pies

Cassie Clusky's come for tea
We'll wash our hands AND use the soap
She eats the scabs right off her knees
She says she grows spuds 'tween her toes

But I wouldn't eat them

Cassie Clusky's come for tea
She saves her afters round her face
She sometimes smells like hot corned beef
She picks her nose and has a taste

And then flicks it

Cassie Clusky's come for tea
We'll ice the costs with lemon curd
She'll squeeze it past her wobble teeth
She buzzes when she says some words

Like toffees and sweeties. Which she scoffs

Cassie Clusky's come for tea
Your smileys a sausage on a plate
You buy a fat one just for me
And sometimes you get belly ache
And then you make a proper brew
I mash it like you showed me to
And that will make it better you'll see and

Cassie Clusky's come for tea



• Wangechi Mutu, 'Pretty Double Head', 2010.

THE LIBERATING POWER OF MONSTROSITY

ART

LILIANA PAVIER

While the horror film genre exploits the female body as a site of terror, women artists can weaponise the same theme as a powerful creative source. Here, Liliana Pavier examines fine art objects through the lens of the horror film genre.

WANGECHI MUTU: MYTHMAKING

Wangechi Mutu is a self-proclaimed "irresponsible anthropologist and irrational scientist" and uses the canonically exploited black, female body as her point of departure. She fragments and distorts with collage and mixed media, splicing cuttings from magazines with medical diagrams.

Mutu's collages merge monstrous mythology with the female body, tinged with violent eroticism, in a manner reminiscent of the conflation of female sexuality with supernatural terror in the horror film *Carrie* (1976, originally a novel by Stephen King). The mythical "curse" of womanhood pulses through both Mutu's art and Brian De Palma's film.

Mutu's collage *Your Story My Curse* (2006) presents a scene with three sexless figures against a bruise-mottled background. Mutu's cultural references and symbolic choices represent a dark and

mystical femininity, both cursed and capable of cursing.

Carrie's opening scene initiates the title character's pubescence and foreshadows her deadly supernatural powers: her 'Curse of Blood' arrives as she showers at school. Ignorant of menstruation, Carrie believes herself to be injured and screams in terror, whilst her peers pelt her with tampons, urging her to "plug it up" and jeering her.

The scene associates female sexuality with danger and mystical power, just as Mutu mythologises her female figures as both sensual and malignant.

Mutu's *The Original Nine Daughters* (2012) includes figures with fantastical features such as claws, feathers, wings or antennae, wearing heels and stilts, or with long fingernails, or with pins in their bodies, a reference to the racism of anthropology toward black female bodies.

Both Mutu and De Palma explore womanhood as fearful, grotesque and erotic. De Palma employs the mystification of nascent female sexuality to understand societal fear of female bodily functions. Mutu reveals a history of fear and fetishisation of black female bodies, while creating a mythology of powerful black women who envision a future of liberation.

MIRE LEE: INSIDE OUT

In her kinetic sculptures, South Korean artist Mire Lee weds the wet horror of bodily function with pulsing desire. This

combination is well represented in the horror film genre. Julia Ducournau's film *Raw* (2016) and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) both use the visual language of abjection to conceive a powerful womanhood.

In *Raw* (2016), vegetarian veterinary student Justine comes of age with an appetite for human flesh. As she enters womanhood, she transforms into a cannibalistic monster. Both Ducournau and Lee strip the body down to raw, animal function, forcing the viewer to face a grotesque aspect of humanity they'd rather avoid.

Lee's exhibition *I'm a fountain of filth raving mad with love* (2022) displays cement mixers, suspended sculptures and ceramic works along with two films, making "a show that gives you a feeling of going into the body of a huge animal".

In *Alien*, the astronauts explore the "gigantic, cavernous, malevolent womb of the mother [alien]". One astronaut, Kane, experiences a phallic oral rape from which the monstrous creature is hatched.

Lee strongly features motherhood in her exhibition. Its title, and the text written on the walls in concrete, are taken from Korean poet Kim Eon Hee, who has a set of poems on motherhood and frequently uses imagery of excrement and the body. Lee presents a film of her own mother sleeping, observing that "people immediately become like meat when they fall asleep".

The exhibition explores Lee's



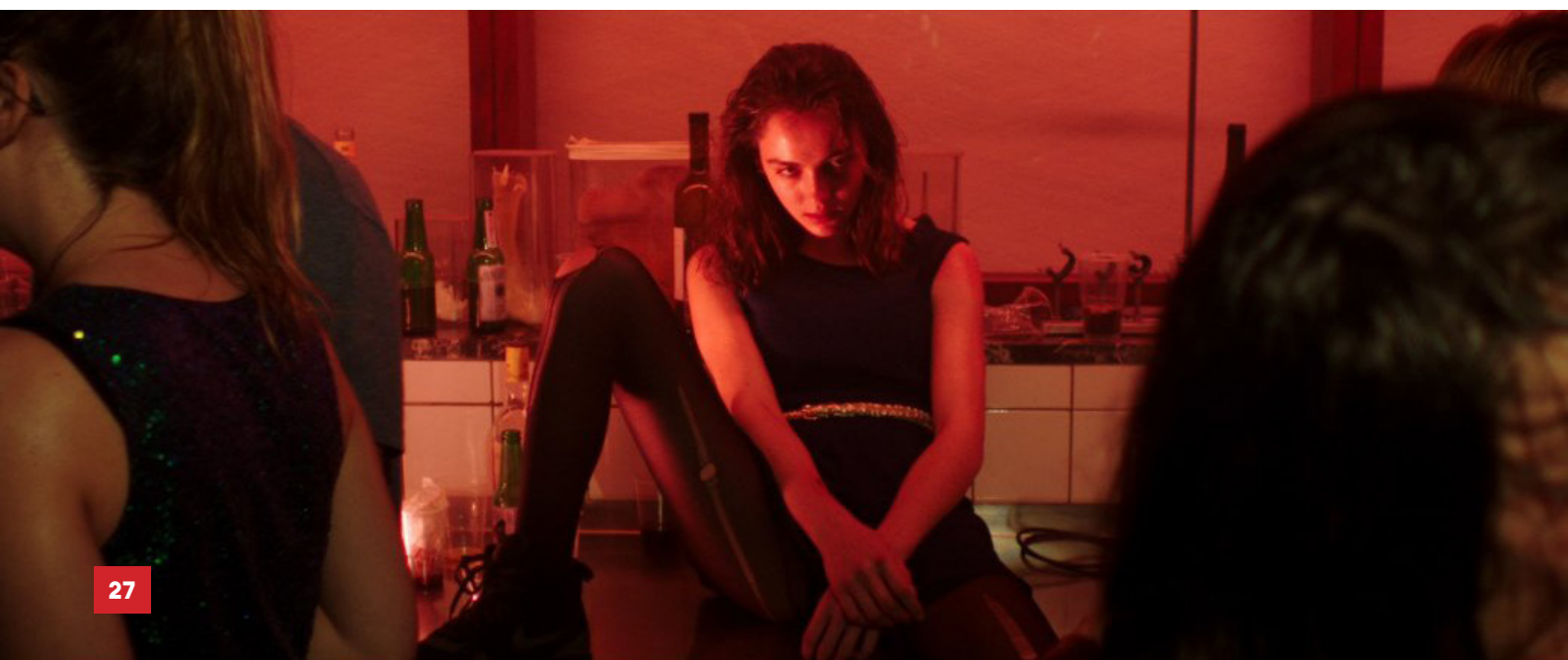
• Tracy Emin, *My Cunt is Wet with Fear*, 1998

fascination with the fetishes of vorarephilia and scatology, both related to the fusion of filth with desire and therefore pain with pleasure, the mode in which the horror genre operates. This also connects strongly to *Raw* (2016), in which Justine's appetite for flesh is figured as sexual desire.

TRACEY EMIN: THE BAD VICTIM SEEKING REVENGE

Tracey Emin has met similar criticism to that levelled at rape revenge horror films such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), which was dismissed as "tasteless, irresponsible, and disturbing" by critics. Emin's iconic tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (1963-1995) was her "way of getting back at [then-boyfriend] Carl

• 'Raw', dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016





Freedman". Motivated by self-defence, Emin regains her power from her literal and figurative rapists by exposing them in her work. Emin is the "all-powerful, all-destructive, deadly femme castrice", like the heroines of rape-revenge films such as *I Spit* and *Teeth* (2007), who literally castrate their rapists.

In *I Spit*, Jennifer is subjected to a series of rapes and becomes a "catatonic, silent obsessive" who ritualistically executes her revenge, seducing and castrating each of her rapists. Critics Martin and Porter call this "one of the most appalling moments in cinema history", implying that it is more disturbing than the rape. Similarly, Emin is characterised as almost more "distasteful" for discussing her history of abuse than the abuse itself.

In *Teeth* (2007), Dawn discovers that she possesses a "vagina dentata" after being assaulted. When Tobey overpowers and begins to rape her, Dawn's vagina castrates him. Dawn discovers that when she is consenting, her vagina's teeth 'withdraw' so that she may have sex safely. Dawn weaponises her vagina to castrate first a schoolmate who has sex with her for a bet and later her stepbrother as revenge for his negligence at her mother's death. In the final scene, the audience perceives that Dawn has now embraced her monstrosity. Both Jennifer and

Dawn transform from victim to deadly seductress.

Emin was assaulted by her mother's lover at the age of ten, and at eleven by a stranger whom she met on Margate beach. In her poem and video, *Why I never became a dancer* (1995), Emin narrates her attempt as a teenager to win a disco-dancing competition in Margate, where she was humiliated and heckled by her audience of local boys (many of whom she had slept with), while dancing and calling out her sexual abusers' names. The video represents her liberation from humiliation and shame. The slut-shaming she had once endured is transformed into a work of art in which Emin has the power of success and celebrity.

Emin's ambiguous recount of abuse makes her, like Dawn and Jennifer, the imperfect rape victim. Because of claims that somehow they "liked it really", they are failed by the justice system and must avenge themselves.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS: MOTHER ALIEN

Louise Bourgeois' portrayal of the "shadowy figure" of the archaic mother resonates with the fearsome mothers of horror, particularly *Mother Alien*. Emin collaborated with Bourgeois on a series of drawings, *Do Not Abandon Me*

(2009-10), exploring the maternal body. Emin and Bourgeois' symbolism of the womb as a void connects directly to the archaic mother figure that Ridley Scott represents in *Alien*. The representation of the womb as an abyss is also akin to the isolated and terrifying space of Scott's iconic tagline: "In space no one can hear you scream".

The spiral motif appears repeatedly in Bourgeois' art, notably in the suite of oil-based, woodcut prints entitled *Spirals* (2005) and in her twisting, bronze sculpture, *Labyrinthine Tower* (1962). For Bourgeois, the spiral describes an infinite maternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

In *Spider* (1997), Bourgeois unites several of her concerns and motifs. The spider's sculpted body and legs sprout threateningly around and over the cell. The spider's body is, significantly, impregnated with glass eggs.

The largest of Bourgeois' arachnid sculptures is *Maman* (2000), the iteration of Bourgeois' mother as inescapable and malevolent. The steel installation towers over the viewer, terrifying in her disproportionate size and with a visible mesh egg sac. *Maman* and the threatening mothers of *Alien* have reproductive functions inescapably linked to their destructive,

• Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999-2002



fearsome capabilities. The power of the maternal for both Bourgeois and Scott is not simply threatening but ultimately protective.

FEMALE MONSTROSITY

The parallels between cinema and the works of these artists reveal the construction of female monstrosity by the patriarchal systems of order. The male gaze toward works of art, the audience's exploitative voyeurism, and the camera's phallic invasion of the female body, are all complicit in this. Each artist represents a different face of the fearful and vilified woman: the racially stereotyped and hypersexualised black woman depicted by Mutu; the abject interior and tabooed sex of the female body by Mire Lee; the promiscuous victim of rape by Emin; the neurotic, phallic motherhood by Bourgeois.

These artists' comprehension of the deep-rooted fear of their subjects enables their liberation. They describe what is perceived as inherently grotesque or unacceptable about womanhood without shame or censorship, and this is where both their criticism and success lie. These artists embrace their perceived monstrosity and in doing so, envision a new future for themselves, free from the limitations and expectations of the patriarchy, to express the nuance of their womanhood in full force and power.

• Wangechi Mutu, *Once upon a time she said, I'm not afraid and her enemies began to fear her* The End, 2013



AN ACHIEVABLE AVERAGE

BEING A WOMAN OF COLOUR AROUND THE WORLD

LORETTA MARIE PERERA

"Be the most interesting person in the room." The Instagram ad, designed to inspire and excite, was surely wasted on me. From being a minority in my native Singapore, to a brown woman in Beijing, to bringing a rare dose of melanin to Moscow, and then falling directly into the ranks of "suspicious category" in Montenegro, and finally to Luxembourg, where being a person of South Asian descent is hardly unusual, my journey has taken me many places where I was, for better or worse, the most interesting in the room by default – or at least the one who drew the most attention upon entering.

After a long journey spanning decades, I love and embrace how I look, and the colour of my skin, but on many occasions I have longed for what many are used to or take for granted: Normal. Uninteresting. Average.

What a quiet pleasure and a privilege it must be, to be unremarkable in how

you look, and to stand out only for your interests, your ideas, your passions, your self.

SINGAPORE

Outspoken, messy, ambitious, and perhaps worst of all, the brownest I could be under the hot Singapore sun. Growing up in Chinese-majority Singapore meant for a long time that my social life was limited to being the single girl of the group. "I love hanging out with you," a close male friend once told me, "I just.. can't imagine dating a girl like you," he elaborated.

Funny you should say that, I mused to myself. I hadn't asked. But he had unwittingly summed up what my teen years would be like: I like you, just not like that.

I started to travel and found out rather quickly that what was undesirable in my own country was "exotic" in others – an unfortunate label that brought with it its own set of problems. It took the better part of a decade to understand my self worth and, through my strengthening feminism, see myself through my own eyes instead of those of the uninterested men around me.

BEIJING

The brown girl in a Chinese-majority setting continued in Beijing, where I moved at 25, with one major difference. Here I wasn't local, but categorised with all other foreigners, regardless of whether you were black, white, or brown. There were many others from Singapore who lived and worked in China – they just didn't tend to look like me. Beyond this expat bubble, my placelessness continued: "Are you sure you're from Singapore?" A question I still get asked often. As we all know, one does often forget where one is from and needs help to get to the bottom of it!

"Sure you're not from India? Pakistan? Colombia? The Seychelles?" a stranger would – and this happens more often than you might think – helpfully offer in a quest to find an answer that makes sense to them. "Sure, why not," I say.

They'd seem confused but victorious at my willingness to concede. They say you should choose your battles,

and convincing strangers of something they've already decided against, I quickly realised, needn't be one of them.

MOSCOW

No one in Moscow knew quite what to make of me. But in a big city that, unlike other parts of Russia, was (at the time) desperately trying to become more international, the suspicious or curious stares were as frequent as the pickup lines.

Even when I was with my partner, a straight white man of 6 ft. 1, men would approach, start conversations. In one instance I was serenaded in a supermarket, in another a man grabbed my arm and pulled me towards him.

It was assumed we weren't together. He was white, I was brown, and in Russia interracial couples were incredibly rare. "Sorry," they'd said once they realised. To my partner, of course – never to me.

MONTENEGRO

Never have I been so equally loathed as I was propositioned in the Balkan country of Montenegro. It was not uncommon for me to hear spiteful words I couldn't understand muttered as I walked past strangers in the street. On the other hand, I was just as frequently sexually propositioned by men – in cafes, driving past in cars, approaching me in trains, or on the streets.

I asked a local friend who had an immediate answer. "They think you're Romani," she said, indicating the colour of my skin. In this country, she went on, Romani women are seen as beggars or sex workers. Here I quickly understood that it didn't matter that I was dressed for the office, headed for the bus, bright and early, with headphones on and very much minding my own business. "Sex?" a man yelled one morning as he pulled over in his car, gesturing to the back seat. Had I been in a freshly pressed power suit, holding an old-school briefcase while walking with purpose in sensible court shoes, none of it would've mattered: they would see my colour, what they'd decided it meant, and it was that that told them all they needed to know.

Many still looked at me as if I was



looking for trouble, or about to ask for money. They despised the fact that I was there, and soon enough, so did I.

LUXEMBOURG

I didn't know very much about Luxembourg before I moved here, but what I've learnt so far is promising. It is in fact where the EU first formed, home to Schengen itself, and far more diverse than I thought it would be. It isn't that racism and discrimination doesn't exist – one report went so far as to declare Luxembourg the EU country with highest levels of discrimination based on job opportunities and the ability to rent an apartment.

But after a long time of being the only one in the room who wasn't white, I have to admit it was with absolute delight that a few weeks ago I looked around a crowded bus and realised that the minorities were in fact, at least in this bus, the only ones there.

I didn't feel special at all; it was absolutely wonderful.

SRI LANKA

For a brief and glorious time when I travelled in Sri Lanka – the native homeland of my father's side – I finally caught a glimpse of normalcy. My last name, Perera, is the most common name in the country: you only need to watch the cricket team play to see that "Perera" is in Colombo what "Smith" is in London. Common, unremarkable, and most importantly, no one would ever ask you how to spell it.

It was towards the local cricket team that I found myself drawn one morning as I wandered about the capital. The Colombo Strikers were training, and I wanted a closer look. "No entry beyond this point!" a sign warned. "Well, that hardly applies to me," I smirked. "What's the worst that could happen?" And off into the grounds I went.

On reflection I wonder if this is the entitlement so many walk the world with: the idea that I probably shouldn't but hey, the consequences, if any, can only be so bad.

In my case, it was a guard gesturing at the sign and waving me off. With a shrug I backed away cheekily apologising with my hands up, and just for a while, I understood what it was to have privilege simply by being the default.

FINDING MY PLACE

With everything that I've learnt and observed over the years, much has changed, but perhaps most of all myself. Sure, I'm still the same brown woman finding her place in a world that isn't always welcoming. Except far from the frustration of my younger self, I've now found the inner strength and confidence to not give a damn whether I'm welcome or not – a privilege in itself, and not one that all may have.

And when it comes to those who still make assumptions because of the colour of my skin? It really is their loss. As much as I've grown to love the melanin I was born with, it's hardly the most interesting thing about me.



IF BARBIES AREN'T SCISSORING, IS IT REALLY BARBIELAND?

RUTH CASHMAN

• *Barbie* (dir. Greta Gerwig, 2023)
BEWARE: SPOILERS.

I went to see *Barbie* wearing pink. My friends were wearing pink. When we arrived at Peckhamplex in South London, almost everyone else was wearing pink. People walking past the cinema to do something else were wearing pink. Not since 'The Queue' has London given itself over to such an all-consuming cultural event.

Variety reports that the marketing budget allocated to *Barbie* was a staggering \$150 million – \$5 million more than the film's production costs. Indeed, much of the film's success can be put down to the fact that before it hit screens, it was everywhere. The "This Barbie" meme template was begging to be "subverted" and, soon enough, "This Barbie is trans", "This Barbie

is on strike", "This Barbie is going to overthrow capitalism" spread through social media. This was enormous free advertising for the film, but it also created a cultural frenzy that was genuinely fun to be part of.

For many girls it was nice to see the world go wild for something girly. Though girls, and teenage girls in particular, are important consumers of the entertainment industry, the pop culture that they consume faces phenomenal vitriol and backlash. There are bad movies and cringy songs for all demographics, but they don't all face equivalent scorn to, say, *Twilight*. Society views teenage girls as superficial and stupid, so their superficial and stupid likes get put in the spotlight, while we all quietly ignore Liam Neeson's latest shoot-at-bad-guys enterprise.

Barbie gave women and girls a film that was unashamedly theirs in a culture war where misogyny rules. At its core, the film was a scattergun liberal feminist answer to the events that have unfolded since the 2016 election of Donald Trump. The all-woman Supreme Court in Barbieland, Midge, the doll who is always pregnant, and Barbie's trip to the gynaecologist all serve as reminders of the overturning of *Roe vs Wade*.

The queer representation in the film is fantastic in terms of casting. The Ls, Gs, Bs and Ts all get their place. Sadly, it is far less apparent in the narrative. We have double-entendre and queer-coding, but big talent is wasted. We

don't get the genital-less queer romance every Barbie fan experimented with as a child, and which the film was screaming out for. If Barbies aren't scissoring, then is it really Barbieland?

YOU FASCIST!

Though *Barbie*, played by Margot Robbie, is the star of the film, Gloria, portrayed by America Ferrera, is our real protagonist. She is a dreamer of Barbieland and the one bringing thoughts of death and cellulite to its shores. As her daughter grew up and away from her, and stopped playing with her dolls, Gloria clung on. But her sad, nostalgic playing is filling Barbieland with all her worries and existential dread.

Gloria represents normal womanhood. She saves Barbieland with an impassioned speech about the impossible expectations placed on women: "It is literally impossible to be a woman... Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong... It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out, in fact, that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault. I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us."

She begins a feminist revolution by consciousness-raising, listing the endless, contradictory expectations that women have to grapple with, and in doing so deprogrammes the Barbies,

who have been brainwashed into servitude by the Kens.

Gloria's daughter, Sasha (Arianna Greenblatt), is a teenager who doesn't want to play with Barbies anymore. She thinks she's outgrown them and, more to the point, thinks they represent much that is wrong in a world she wants to change. On meeting Barbie she doesn't want anything to do with her, yelling, "you've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented." She adds, "You set the feminist movement back 50 years, you fascist!"

Sadly, that is the last we hear of our defiant Zoomer. Before you know it, she's helping save Barbieland, with next to no narrative to explain why. We have an unappreciated mother, juggling too much, who wishes her child could stay her little girl. We have a daughter who is developing her own identity, rejects the sexist toys of her childhood and is a bit rude. How is this resolved? The rebellious teenager comes to not just support her mother, but to accept she was wrong to judge Barbie. Their relationship is saved by an about-turn on the part of the child's entire worldview and little growth on the part of the mother, bar an increase in confidence. Be nice to your mother, and accept your differing political views are a character flaw you should quietly iron

out. Even in your most run-of-the-mill teen movies these parent/teen conflicts are usually resolved by both parties learning something of the view of the other. Not here.

And then we have the awful line from the Barbie creator: "We mothers stand still so our daughters can look back to see how far they have come."

Just yuck.

META-BARBIE

What is going on here? Of course, we know the commercial purpose of the Barbie movie was to sell Barbies. But unlike *Toy Story* this film isn't selling toys to kids; it is selling toys to millennial mothers. The message of the film is that buying your daughters Barbies is not only fine, it might even be feminist.

The meta-analysis comes thick and fast throughout the film. There are jokes about Barbie's creator's tax fraud. Parent company, Mattel, are portrayed as a part evil, part bumbling fools, borrowing heavily from *The Lego Movie's* Mr Business. Meta-Barbie allows the audience to relax. Don't worry, you may have just paid to watch a well-produced advert, but we're all in on the joke. We laugh at the all-male Mattel board, but Mattel doesn't actually have an all-male board. In all the visual jokes

about the physicality of Barbieland, we never saw reference to the famous study showing that a scaled-up Barbie would be forced to walk on all fours and would be physically incapable of lifting her head. The purpose of the knowing jokes about the brand is, ironically and yet unsurprisingly, to save the brand.

Alongside this kids-gloves pisstaking, the film makes a very earnest defense of Barbie: "Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls. But the dolls were always and forever baby dolls, until..." The Barbie movie tells us that Barbie is a good role model, actually, because she shows little girls that they can have jobs, become astronauts and Supreme Justices, and live in dreamhouses without men. This contradictory tone is at the heart of the film, a mish-mash of messages and narrative. Don't try to understand it too deeply or it all begins to fall apart. The most generous reading is that Barbieland is incoherent because it represents the chaotic imagination of children's play. It is not supposed to make sense, it is cinematic surrealism molded in pink. More likely, the incoherence stems from the film being a battleground, with different forces — Mattel and Greta Gerwig, at least — trying to make different films.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

It is useful for us to interrogate the ideology of mass media. Film represents and reproduces myths about society and it's valuable to consider how and why particular views are shown. That shouldn't be the be-all and end-all of film for socialists, however. I have serious criticisms of the portrayal of women and feminism in *Barbie*, but I also loved it. When I criticise the film, its politics or even the viral media hype surrounding it, I don't do it from a position of sneery judgment. I loved the film and I loved the mass excitement around it.

We do not need to put our communist stamp of approval on art. We do not need to watch films that reflect our politics back at us or tell us how to transform society. Art which shows us the complexity of human personality, its passions and feelings, and that which makes us human, is in itself more



gratifying than preachy lessons written as films. Films that are very funny, or very beautiful, or very scary have value in themselves.

Feminist and socialist theory needs us to read books, go to meetings and talk to each other. It won't be served up at the Peckhamplex. Real wins require real life struggles.

People will be genuinely moved by moments in *Barbie*. I know many people who cried as Barbie sat at the bus stop, first witnessing small moments of humanity. My friend and I grabbed each other, giggling uncontrollably, when the Kens were playing Matchbox 20 on the guitar at the Barbies.

I was mesmerised by the authentically unreal sets in Barbieland and the Jacques Demy-style colour palette. I thought every single visual gag about the plastic world was fantastically well done. If I thought *Women's Fightback* would print it, I'd write a review of those alone. Barbie sliding over the plastic pool was magnificent. The Ken dance-off was funny and catchy. Whatever its politics, for all these reasons and more, it was a wonderful film.

REPORTS

25 THOUSAND MARCH FOR TRANS PRIDE

WILSON GIBBONS

Workers' Liberty activists joined tens of thousands of protesters marching in support of trans rights at this year's London Trans Pride on 8 July. The protest was an emphatic rejection of the Tories' transphobic culture war and a vibrant show of solidarity with the UK trans community.

At its peak, the demonstration was so large that organisers reportedly altered the route to accommodate the brightly dressed, politically-charged crowds which filled the streets as they marched from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park Corner.

Placard highlights included "no borders, no binaries, no Tories" and (in reference to the difficulties getting gender affirming care) "no more deaths, no

more waitlists". Chants of "fuck the pigs — protect trans kids" were heard throughout. Others mourned the loss of trans loved ones, and Brianna Ghey, who was murdered in Warrington in February this year.

THE FIGHT IN THE UNIONS: THE CASE OF PCS

The small scale of the trade union bloc, however, highlighted the need to bring the fight for trans rights into our unions and to develop the labour movement's politics on the issue.

The PCS leadership, for example, has on several occasions taken reactionary positions on trans rights. In 2017 and 2018, the NEC opposed motions calling for self identification for trans people. In 2019, Mark Serwotka, the union's General Secretary, unilaterally signed a letter with so-called "gender critical" feminists and other vehemently anti-trans individuals claiming proper debate was being prevented by violent trans activists. Serwotka and the NEC were later censured via a motion passed overwhelmingly by the membership, which argued that his actions brought the union into disrepute and contravened democratically decided policy. Even in this debate the leadership dragged its heels, using coded arguments about "legitimate concerns" among cisgender women.

The work by rank-and-file members in the PCS to hold its leadership to account and consistently pass policy defending trans people is a model that trade unionists in other unions can look to. It was perhaps unsurprising, in the context of this ongoing battle within the union, to see a crowd of PCS flags at the heart of the trade union bloc at Trans Pride.

FREE SARAH JANE BAKER

Trans activist Sarah Jane Baker is currently a political prisoner. During her speech at London Trans Pride, she said: "If you see a TERF, punch them in the fucking face". Sarah later publicly apologised for the statement. Her comments were unhelpful, designed to be edgy and outrageous — but she never intended to inspire actual violence.

Sarah was on probation for crimes she committed over 30 years ago. The initial response from both police and the probation service was to take no further





action. It was only after Home Secretary Suella Braverman intervened personally that she was recalled to an all-male prison.

Her arrest is clearly politically motivated, part of the culture war we were protesting against at Trans Pride. If leading politicians are able to influence the police like this, then the wider implications for protest and free speech are obvious.

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THIS INJUSTICE

- Messages of support can be sent to: freesarahjanebaker@proton.me
- @freesarahjbaker
- Crowdfunder: bit.ly/SJB-crowdfunder

SHEFFIELD'S FIRST RADICAL PRIDE

ALEX HULME

On 22 July over 300 people descended on Bakers Pool in Sheffield for the city's first ever Radical Pride. The organisers, Sheffield Radical Pride, are a group of grassroots activists from across the city. Their mission is to reclaim Pride and make it an anticapitalist protest again, without the presence of corporate pinkwashing or the police.

The march set off, headed by blocs made up of QTPOC (Queer, Trans, Intersex, Black and People of Colour), sex workers, migrants and refugees, as well as a bicycle bloc whose role was

to block off streets and stop cars whilst the march progressed. Attendees filtered in behind the blocs with their own placards, banners and flags, chanting as they went. The march reached the moor, where it stopped to hear speeches from the blocs, before setting off again towards its end point, Endcliffe Park. Here, a "queer takeover" had been organised, consisting of music, stalls and food. There was also information about obtaining HRT without the help of the NHS, gender confirming makeup and a clothing swap on offer.

The event was a great success, bringing together queer activists from across the city and further afield. The event really stood as a reminder for what Pride should and can be, free from the corporate influence and heavy police presence that we see at other cities' Prides, such as in Leeds and London.

For me, Sheffield Radical Pride has fostered a new feeling towards Pride parades, one that I had not experienced before. The atmosphere was electric and everyone was excited to take part and make history in Sheffield. This was the first Pride Sheffield had seen since 2019, and it was very telling how much people needed it to happen.

The crowd was very young and, unlike other marches I have attended in the past, the number of queer people vs straight people, who attend Pride events for the spectacle and partying, was flipped on its head. The march was made for the queer community in Sheffield.

The event was a major win for Sheffield Radical Pride – I look forward to seeing what they can pull off next year.

JOIN A READING GROUP

We run socialist feminist reading groups in both South London and Sheffield. Each month we discuss a book – either a new release or a classic from the movement.

BRIXTON, SOUTH LONDON Effra Social, SW2 1DF

- *Abolition Revolution*, by Aviah Sarah Day & Shanice Octavia McBean
Sunday 1 October, 2PM
- **No meeting in November.**
- *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure*, by Lynne Segal
Sunday 3 December, 2PM

For a copy of the book(s) or more details: office@workersliberty.org

SHEFFIELD Showroom Cafe, S1 2BX

- *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, by Molly Smith & Juno Mac
Monday 2 October, 5.30PM
- *Cannibal Capitalism*, by Nancy Fraser
Monday 6 November, 5PM
- *Abolition Revolution*, by Aviah Sarah Day & Shanice Octavia McBean
Monday 4 December, 5PM

For a copy of the book(s) or more details: sheffield@workersliberty.org

THE NEW "SECTION 28"

JENNY WREN

The government is due to release guidance for schools around trans pupils, but it has been repeatedly delayed due to concerns it will not comply with the 2010 Equalities Act. What was initially meant to be advice for single-sex schools regarding the legality of refusing to admit trans pupils, now looks to be much wider ranging and incredibly alarming for trans youth and school staff.

The guidance is likely to compel schools to inform parents if a child discloses that they are trans or questioning their gender; to establish the need for parental consent for a child to socially transition or switch pronouns in school; and to forbid staff from respecting students' preferred pronouns if their parents disagree with the transition. Even where parents are supportive, there will be no expectation that staff or students will respect a trans student's preferred name or pronouns – they can refuse on grounds that to do so would go against their own beliefs, or if they believe that it would make other students uncomfortable. It may also recommend that trans students are excluded from competitive sports.

It is reminiscent of Section 28, the section of the 1988 Local Government Act that banned local authorities and schools from "promoting homosexuality". Teachers weren't allowed to teach about same-sex relationships, and anyone who broke the law could face disciplinary action. The impact was devastating for generations of LGBT pupils and schoolworkers that lived through Section 28 until its repeal in 2003. But it also has a lasting legacy; homophobic bullying is still widespread in schools today.

As a schoolworker this new guidance fills me with dread. We have a number of trans students and I have always felt proud of how supportive our setting



has been for them. It has been a safe space for young people to discuss their gender identity and "try out" names and pronouns before coming out. I have witnessed the wide range of responses these students get when they come out at home. Some parents take their trans kid to Pride. Some take a little while to get used to the new pronouns. Others refuse to accept their gender identity, persistently deadnaming their child. Some parents physically assault their children for daring to tell the truth about how they feel and who they are.

Even when young people have supportive parents at home, choosing how and when to come out to their parents is a deeply personal decision.

Another major concern is how this guidance would give protection to transphobic bullies, be they staff or students. In no other area of life would it be acceptable to repeatedly misgender and deadname someone. In my school any such behaviour would quickly be addressed and stamped out. Under this guidance I can sadly envision a scenario where trans students are subjected to the regular humiliation of having to answer to their dead-name multiple times a day, in order to protect a transphobic teacher's supposed "right" to say "Jane" instead of "John".

Schools do desperately need some sensible guidance around trans issues: on how to best support trans students with things like safely accessing toilets, changing facilities and residential trips, for instance. But this guidance treats trans people like they are somehow more dangerous and more of a safeguarding risk than any other student. Rather than setting out to protect students, it is seeking to protect transphobes

We must challenge this guidance at every turn. Trade unions in the 1980s were at the forefront of the campaign to repeal Section 28. Likewise, today's union movement needs to have a strong response, building a campaign of non-compliance if the guidance should come into force.

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

If you would like to organise with us, or contribute to *Women's Fightback*, please write to us:

womensfightback@workersliberty.org

📷 womens.fightback
