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WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

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

We stand for trans-inclusive, sex-positive, class struggle feminism. We organise in our workplaces and trade unions, and in the student movement and 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:
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Edited by Kelly Rogers.

Cover photo: London protest following the kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer, 15 March 2021.

IN THIS ISSUE

The thread running through this edition of *Women's Fightback* is the state, and its capacity to coerce, oppress and harm. The prison system is a rough place at the best of times. But for pregnant women it is a living nightmare, and for newborns it can be deadly. Criminalisation is threatening our reproductive rights like never before. In Israel, state repression is unleashed on opponents of atrocities being committed in Gaza and teenagers refusing to serve in the military. In response to these attacks, we discuss abolitionism, and explore the debate over how the left engages with public sector workers who are, willingly or not, a part of the state machine.

We also bring you reports of the fight against sexism in the trade union movement; a story of anti-racist organising in the 1980s; reviews of feminist films and art exhibitions; and plenty of international reports and analysis from Belarus, Sudan, Ireland, Iran and more.

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NO BIRTHS BEHIND BARS

Aisha Dodwell is an activist with No Births Behind Bars, the campaign to get pregnant women out of the prison system.

Aisha spoke to Kelly Rogers.

In the early hours of 27 September 2019, Rianna Cleary gave birth to baby Aisha alone in her prison cell at HMP Bronzefield, the biggest women's prison

in Europe. More than 12 hours earlier, as she went into labour, she had pressed the buzzer in her cell and pleaded for help, but prison officers did not call for medical assistance or go to check on her. She buzzed again. No answer. Several hours later, an officer shone her torch into the cell during a routine check. By then, Cleary was on all fours, in pain and acute distress. The officer later gave evidence that "nothing caught my attention, so I moved on".

Left to give birth alone, the 18-year-old Cleary was forced to sever her baby's umbilical cord with her teeth. At 8.30am, her cell was unlocked, but the prison guards still did nothing, appearing not to notice that there was a baby in the cell, or that the cell and Cleary were covered in blood. It was left to two inmates to raise the alarm and by the time anyone intervened, baby Aisha was dead.

When baby Aisha's death hit the news, Aisha Dodwell had just given birth to her third child and, along with a few friends (also new mothers on maternity leave) decided that something had to be done. "Sitting there with our babies, we were completely horrified to think that there are women in this country giving birth in locked cells."

Dodwell was 18 when she had her first child, the same age as Rianna Cleary. "When you're there with your newborn baby having just gone through all the struggle – the trials and tribulations of pregnancy and childbirth and the postpartum period – you know how desperate and vulnerable you are as a woman."

"There are amazing networks that form when you're on maternity leave. It's an

incredible moment in your adult life when you suddenly make lots of friends and bond with new people." As they were coming up to Mothers' Day, Dodwell and her new friends decided to issue a call out to mums across London to come with their children to Parliament Square. This was how No Births Behind Bars was formed: "It was really a simple feeling of revulsion at what the state can do to women."

UNSAFE

The NHS classifies all pregnant women in prison as 'high-risk pregnancies', and for good reason. Women in prison are twice as likely as other women to have a premature birth, and are seven-times more likely to suffer a stillbirth. 25% of babies born in prison are admitted to a neonatal unit after birth. 12% have a low birth weight, compared to 6.5% of babies born outside of prison.

Simple things, usually taken for granted, become impossible, from nutritious food and regular exercise to accessing antenatal and other medical appointments. "When I was pregnant, I was on the phone all the time with worry," says Dodwell. "It would be a case of 'I haven't felt the baby kick' and we'd go and check."

"Anyone who has been pregnant knows about all the extra things you need, and the people you need around you. I used to sleep with six pillows just to get comfortable at night. After I'd given birth I couldn't sit up without help from my partner. With my first baby, I couldn't feed them without two people helping me every time. It took weeks just for me to be able to feed my baby on my own."

"As a society, is this how we're going to treat women at one of the most vulnerable times of their lives?"

UNJUST

No Births Behind Bars is focused on a single goal: changing the law so that pregnant women are not held in prison. The campaign doesn't have a wider political programme that can be neatly defined as abolitionist or anti-prison. But its activists share an understanding of the harm caused by the prison system in its current form.

The inquest into Aisha Cleary's death described Rianna Cleary as "extremely vulnerable". "Her childhood had been traumatic as a result of neglect and abuse... Her education had been disrupted and, from quite a young age, she had had





• Aisha Dodwell (right) with No Births Behind Bars outside the Royal Courts of Justice, London.

contact with the criminal justice system. She was also extremely vulnerable to exploitation and harm by others [...] By 2018 Ms Cleary had become immersed in a lifestyle where she was being exploited and groomed to be in this sort of criminal world."

Cleary was imprisoned after pleading guilty to a robbery charge. She had been living in a homeless hostel at the time and, hoping that she might receive better care in prison, asked to be remanded while awaiting her sentence. When she got to HMP Bronzefield, however, she was treated without empathy or kindness. She was told by social services and prison officers that her baby would be taken away from her. In her witness statement submitted to baby Aisha's inquest, Cleary said, "I felt like nobody was trying to understand me [...] I wondered at that time if I was being treated differently from them because of my race, because I was young or because of my past. I felt like I was trapped and had nowhere to go."

According to the charity Women in Prison, over half of incarcerated women survived emotional, physical or domestic abuse as children. Two-thirds have experienced domestic abuse as adults. Seven-in-ten suffer from mental ill-health.

Women are also, in the vast majority of cases, imprisoned for nonviolent crimes.

More than three-in-five women in prison are sentenced to six months or less. one-in-five women prisoners are being held on remand, and of those more than half do not receive custodial sentences. 'Theft from shops' – overwhelmingly a crime of poverty – is the most common offence, accounting for more than a third of women's prison sentences of fewer than six months.

For Dodwell, it's important to get this information out there. "There's a real societal obsession with serious female criminals – the Lucy Letbys, the Rosemary Wests. There's a fascination with women who commit crime, and that's who people think of when you talk about women in prison."

"When I speak about this work, the first response I get is: 'what about the murderers?' But poverty is the main driver of why women end up getting caught up in the criminal justice system. It's a group of very very vulnerable women who more often than not are victims – of poverty and domestic violence. When it comes to serious, violent criminals, the numbers are miniscule."

"It raises the question: is the criminal justice system really fit for purpose? These women are being failed by society."

SUCCESS

No Births Behind Bars faces a hostile political landscape. "Especially in election year", says Dodwell, "no politician wants to be seen to be soft on crime and it has been very difficult for us to get any parliamentary breakthrough, even if we do get sympathetic noises from individual politicians. They want to be seen to be bringing more police, more prisons, locking up more people, because they think that'll get them more votes."

Despite these challenges, the campaign has kept fighting, organising public stunts and protests to get people talking about the dangers of putting pregnant women behind bars. They have worked closely with feminist campaign Level Up, and issued open letters with the backing of the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and other expert organisations.

"We want big legislative change", Dodwell continues, "that's obvious – but last year the Sentencing Council announced a review of its sentencing guidelines." So No Birth Behind Bars changed tack and, on top of their protests and press work, they organised submissions to the Sentencing Council's public consultation. Last month, they had a big win when the Council introduced a new mitigating factor of pregnancy in sentencing. Courts now

have to consider the impact that prison could have on a pregnant woman, and the fact that every pregnancy in prison is high risk. The move will undoubtedly mean fewer pregnant women are given custodial sentences.

"There are eleven countries around the world where jailing pregnant women is outlawed. That's the great aim – for it to be absolutely not an option for pregnant women to be put in prison – but for now this is a huge breakthrough", says Dodwell. "It goes to show that a really big part of achieving change is people getting out and showing with their feet what they want. We've been to the Royal Courts of Justice, we've been to Parliament Square, we've been outside the prisons. Getting out on the streets has been really powerful."

FIGHTING ON

In October last year, Rianna Cleary attended a Prevention of Future Deaths hearing to give evidence. The coroner decided not to issue any recommendations, asserting that sufficient changes had already been made. Speaking publicly for the first time since baby Aisha's death, Cleary issued a statement, which she read out live on Channel 4. She said: "when it comes to prisons, what's written on a piece of paper is never what happens in practice. The way the prisons are run, it is all about power and control. They will never be caring places. Prison officers do not always follow policy – look what happened to me when I pressed my cell bell twice – nobody came."

HM Prison and Probation Service report that in the 12-month period running up to March 2023 there were 193 pregnant women held in UK prisons and 44 births. For No Births Behind Bars, even one is too many. The fight continues.

- No Births Behind Bars
- @ [noprisonbirths](#)
- Level Up
- bit.ly/levelup-pregnancyinprison

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LONG READ

THE SOCIALIST CASE FOR ABOLITION

CARRIE EVANS

As a socialist and abolitionist, it's my firm belief that it's not enough to simply reform the police, immigration enforcement, prisons and the wider criminal justice system. Instead we must aim to completely dismantle them and, in their place, invest in communities to address the root causes of harm in society.

Since 2020, when George Floyd was murdered, the Black Lives Matter movement has undergone a global resurgence. Alongside the murder of Sarah Everard, the David Carrick scandal and the Casey report into the conduct of the Met Police, this movement has allowed abolitionist ideas to spring into mainstream discourse in quite a spectacular way. It's now commonplace to find articles about defunding the police and alternatives to prison in publications like *Vogue* and *GQ*. On the one hand this is positive, but on the other, abolitionist ideas divorced from their radical roots run the risk of becoming nothing more than talking points for toothless reform.

By its nature, abolitionism forces you to think in revolutionary terms. Policing and the criminal justice system cannot be eradicated within the capitalist system because they are integral to its functioning. This is not to say that we can't or shouldn't push for reform. But activists should only expend energy on reforms insofar as they further the goal of radically transforming our society. It is not the job of socialist abolitionists to throw themselves into community liaison boards or independent advisory groups which only serve as a veneer on ultimately unchanged institutions.

As a socialist, my beef with the police is not just about hostility to some of the social roles they play. Yes, I am hostile to the racist, classist nature of policing, but I do not believe these aspects exist due to glitches in the system or bad apples. The police and the wider criminal justice system exists to oppress the working class of all races, and defend private property and the political status quo. Any useful function they may have is an accidental by-product.

Contrary to the popular imagination, policing as it is practised now isn't an innate, ancient way of organising society, but a modern one, with its origins in industrialisation and colonial rule.

MODERN POLICING

Industrialisation brought with it a massive increase in population. The UK grew from around five million in 1700 to nearly nine million by 1801. Many of these people were migrants. Industrialisation and

empire also brought obscene wealth, far more than society had seen before. For the first time in history this wealth was no longer hidden away behind castle walls. Over the course of a century, Britain became home to masses of dispossessed people, who were brutalised in the factory system or domestic servitude. These people lived, worked and drank together. They lived lives of poverty and backbreaking labour in some of the richest cities the world has ever seen. This was (rightly) terrifying for the ruling class. Seeing the unfolding of revolutions in both France and Haiti, establishment figures became increasingly worried about a workers' uprising.

So, the story goes, in 1829 Robert Peel invented the Met police and ushered in the age of modern policing. But that's not really true. The Met wasn't even the first professional police force in London, let alone the world. The first in London was the Marine Police Force, set up by the West India Committee in 1798. The West India Committee was a late Georgian lobby group, formed to represent the interests of the slavocracy of the British Caribbean. Its police force was charged with stopping theft from ships carrying goods (including enslaved people) from British Caribbean colonies. It was so successful that it was officially adopted by the state in 1800 in order to protect all vessels on the Thames.

The concept of the Metropolitan Police

did not simply come to Robert Peel in a dream one night. Professional policing was first invented in Ireland, where many of the anxieties and contradictions of 19th Century England had been present for a long time. In 1798, shortly before Peel took over the role of Chief Secretary for Ireland, the United Irishmen's Rebellion had taken place, led by Theobald Wolfe Tone. Inspired by the French Revolution, the Society of United Irishmen aimed to create an independent Irish republic free from British discrimination against Catholics and Protestant nonconformists. This did nothing to calm Peel's already existing paranoia about revolutionaries, so one of his first acts in Ireland was to set up the Peace Preservation Force in 1814, as well as a system of county constabularies under the Irish Constabulary Act 1822.

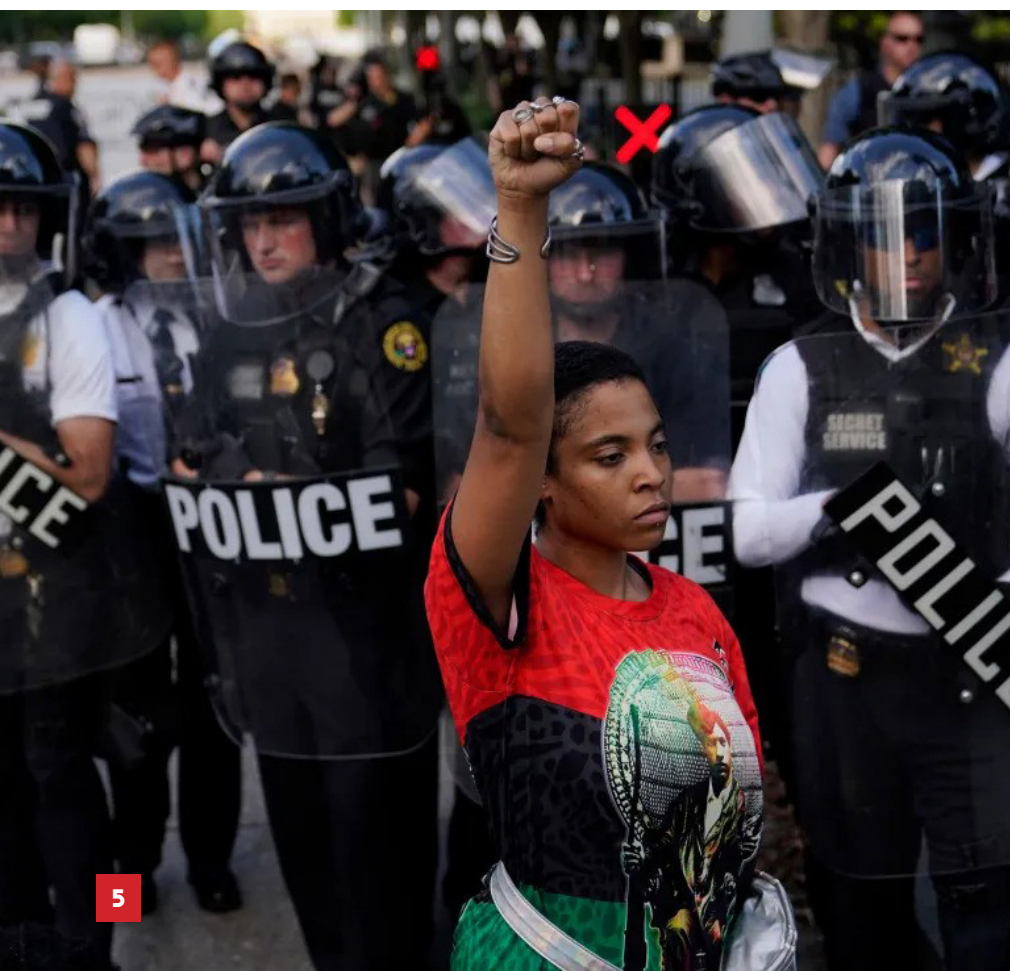
Brutal military crackdowns had proved to be counterproductive, and were more likely to cultivate unrest than quell it. To uphold colonial rule, a new institution was needed, which recruited from the native population, albeit from the protestant minority. It would sit somewhere between the army and the civilian population. The model proved so successful that it was transported back to England to deal with the new, unruly, (often Irish) urbanised working class. The Police Bills which Peel brought to parliament as Home Secretary were almost identical to those introduced in Ireland.

IMPERIAL BOOMERANG

Imperial boomerang is a phrase used to describe a situation in which techniques of coercive control are perfected in colonies before being deployed against oppressed populations in the motherland. It wasn't just the police. National prisons systems were used across India and Jamaica to quell dissent and reinforce racial hierarchies around fifty years before they were brought back to England. Institutions like MI5 have their roots in the Committee of Imperial Defence. Special Branch (the wing of policing most notorious for acting outside the law to quell political dissent) is also a by-product of colonial rule in Ireland. It's tempting to see these imperial roots as a historical curiosity with no real bearing on today's police and carceral system. However, when viewed through the lens of how these institutions still relate to the working class and marginalised communities today, it becomes clear the system isn't broken. It is behaving exactly as it was always intended to behave.

The criminal justice system is institutionally racist because the system it upholds is racist. Black, ethnic minority and immigrant communities are overpoliced and receive much harsher punishments in court. Stop and search is up to ten times more likely to target black and minority ethnic people. Analysis conducted for the Lammy Review found a clear direct association between ethnic groups and the odds of receiving a custodial sentence. With black people 53%, Asian 55%, and other ethnic groups 81% more likely to be sent to prison at the Crown Court, even when factoring in higher not-guilty plea rates. Black men are 26% more likely than white men to be remanded in custody. They are also nearly 60% more likely to plead not guilty.

Women are not exempt from institutional racism. Black, Asian and minority ethnic women are over-represented in the criminal justice system. BAME women make up 16% of the female prison population despite constituting around 14% of the population. They also often face a 'double disadvantage' of being discriminated against on the basis of their gender and their race. BAME women are more likely to be committed for trial at the Crown Court, and are more likely to receive a custodial sentence than white women. Almost one-in-ten women in prison are foreign nationals. Gypsy or Traveller women account for approximately 6% of the prison population, despite making up an estimated 0.7% of the general population.





SEX WORKERS

If you want to see a perfect example of how racism intersects with misogyny, look no further than the laws we have around sex workers. Specifically, anti-trafficking laws. On examination, it quickly becomes clear the safety of women is not the primary concern of the police when implementing these laws. People are trafficked into the sex trade through coercion, abuse, dishonesty and force on a daily basis. We should not minimise this fact. But there are also many people who willingly work in the sex industry. Anti-trafficking laws are purposely set up to make the distinction between consenting and forced sex work as blurred as possible. They are then used to give the police extended powers to arrest and harass sex workers, especially sex workers of colour and migrants.

According to Decrim Now: "In October 2016, the Metropolitan Police raided six massage parlours in Chinatown, London. Police told the media that they were 'bringing to justice those who seek to profit from the exploitation of vulnerable people'. The police seized cash from women's lockers; made 24 arrests (none of which were for trafficking offences; 17 of which were for immigration offences), and ultimately deported 13 people[...] In 2017, Wiltshire Police raided a Swindon flat, and announced that they would 'make sure that any cases of human exploitation are prioritised and the victims removed to

safety'[...] However, the three Romanian women who the police arrested were simply deported".

In all of these cases, raids on commercial sex venues are presented as acts of protection, designed to save victims from the sex trade. In reality, they are a cover for the police to arrest and deport women willingly engaging in the sex trade. The tragic irony is that draconian immigration laws and the hostile environment feed trafficking. People have to pay exploitative smugglers to get them here in the first place. They then find themselves locked out of the mainstream economy with no recourse to public funds, unable to assert labour or legal rights for fear of being deported. This leaves people (especially women) uniquely vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The general criminalisation of sex work makes it harder for sex workers to blow the whistle if they do suspect abuse or trafficking.

INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Especially since 2020, the police's treatment of marginalised communities has become widely understood. The much harder question is what we should do about safety, especially the safety of women and girls. Carceral feminists believe the way to keep women safe is by partnering with the police and the criminal justice system in order to disrupt cycles of violence and remove perpetrators. This approach ignores the reality, which is that

the police don't stop harm at all. They may turn up after harm has already been inflicted, but even then their involvement is at best ineffectual and, more likely, itself harmful.

As Aviah Day and Shanice McBean write in *Abolition Revolution* (2022): "Across the board, the police are neither good at preventing crime nor good at solving crime once it's happened. In 2020, 98.4% of reported rapes led to no charge and this is before we factor in statistical drop-off due to unreported rapes or consider unsuccessful prosecutions after charge. People often ask abolitionists what we will do with rapists if we abolish prisons, yet we already live in a society where rape is decriminalised and the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence remain entirely unaccountable."

They go on to point out data from the College of Policing's own think tank, which shows that "criminal justice sanctions for intimate partner violence had no consistent effect on subsequent offending and that prison sentences in particular were associated with higher rates of recidivism 36% of the time and had no effect in the remainder."

The police are themselves perpetrators of extreme violence against women, and the criminal justice system is a key site for it. The problem is far greater than

the widely publicised cases of individual predators operating under the cover of the Met Police. Women who do report sexual or domestic violence to the police often find themselves criminalised in the process. Many end up in immigration detention centres or prisons. In these brutal, dehumanising institutions sexual violence is the norm and is perpetrated by both inmates and guards as a form of coercive control.

As veteran abolitionist Angela Davis argues in an essay in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance* (2000): "The sexual abuse of women in prison is one of the most heinous state-sanctioned human rights violations within the United States today. Women prisoners represent one of the most disenfranchised and invisible adult populations in our society. The absolute power and control the state exercises over their lives both stems from and perpetuates the patriarchal and racist structures that, for centuries, have resulted in the social domination of women."

Here in the UK, Yarl's Wood, one of our largest immigration detention centres, has long been plagued by accusations of sexual abuse, inmate torture and cover ups. So have many other prisons across the UK.

REDUCING HARM

Abolitionists must take the task of reducing harm seriously. The most

effective way to do this is not by disappearing and brutalising people we don't like. Rather, it's by understanding and addressing the political, economic and social conditions which give rise to violence in the first place. The socialist abolitionist project is about progressing to a world where the safety and health of everyone is genuinely prioritised.

We should not be naive. We cannot abolish the police and the prison system overnight without plunging society into chaos. Abolitionism is unachievable under capitalism. At present, human need comes second to profit and ownership. But this is not to say that nothing can change short of socialist revolution. The mark of any progressive society should be its ability to shrink the police more and more as it addresses disparities in power and builds social provisions capable of reducing harm.

As well as democratising the police service, and rolling back their powers, we must also ensure people have their material needs met. We need clean, safe, affordable housing; life-long free education; a fit-for-purpose NHS; full employment; and liveable benefits. We need fully-funded services which work to de-escalate tension, strengthen communities and keep families together: mental health, rehab, community and youth services. This would make a lot of crime - crimes of poverty, alienation and desperation - disappear.

VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Treating violence as a public health problem is proven to reduce harm in the long term. In Scotland, knife deaths have been dramatically reduced by moving away from a police-centred approach. People deemed to be at risk of offending are offered support with housing, relocation, employment and training. Many take up these opportunities to great effect. Early intervention programmes like SureStart significantly reduce the likelihood of behavioural issues when children are ten and older. Programmes working with children up to eight years old return substantial benefits in adulthood, including higher education attainment, reduced crime rates and improved physical health. Early parental training has shown long lasting effectiveness in reducing violent crime. In later years, youth centres, outreach and after-school services are shown to have a positive effect in reducing crime, arrest rates and exclusions. None of these are perfect, and all fail to address the systemic underlying issues that are inherent within the capitalist system. But they all point to a different way of understanding crime.

Still, we must be bolder. Abolitionism (even only partly realised) is not just about rebuilding the welfare state. We also need to look at what is criminalised and why. We should be fighting for freedom of movement, the legalisation of all drugs and the decriminalisation of sex work. Without these, we will always be losing the battle. Draconian, racist immigration controls create the perfect conditions for the worst kinds of exploitation imaginable. The drug and sex trades are violent because they are left to unregulated black markets. In the absence of normal regulatory mechanisms and trade union organisation, violent discipline becomes the norm. This is great if you run a drug cartel, a people-trafficking business or a for-profit prison, but terrible if you're anyone else.

We cannot know what the realisation of full abolitionism would look like, just as there are no blueprints for (small-c) communism. There may always be people who are too dangerous to live in society, and we need to address this in a way that's humane, centred around safety rather than punishment or vengeance. What we do know is that the current system doesn't work. Until we are bold enough to transform it we will never be truly safe, because we will never shake this brutal cycle of fear, violence and pain.





IN AND AGAINST THE STATE

SOFT COPS OR CLASS FIGHTERS?

Justine Canada is Branch Secretary of Lewisham UNISON.

The left has long debated the merits of socialist organising in the public sector. Are public sector workers – border guards, work coaches, social workers, teachers – uniquely placed to transform our public services or are they the ‘soft cops’ of an oppressive system?

COPS BY ANOTHER NAME?

Public sector workers, part of the state apparatus, reproduce the ideologies and structures of power, monitoring and reinforcing social norms, and handing out punishments to those that do not, or cannot, conform. Consider the role of schoolworkers in policing gender and sexuality. Thatcher’s anti-LGBT Section 28 prohibited teachers from “promoting homosexuality”. Its younger brother is our current government’s guidance on trans and gender-questioning students.

Day-to-day, workers on the frontline of public services deliver policies that are often extremely harmful. Facing a crumbling NHS and chronically underfunded mental healthcare provision, mental health workers often rely on sectioning people in crisis, rather than carrying out therapeutic or preventative work. Job centre workers sanction benefit claimants for not attending appointments, driving already vulnerable people deeper into poverty. Housing officers issue eviction notices to council tenants for violating tenancy conditions. Teachers in schools with unmanageable class sizes and pastoral support cut to the bone, resort to harsh systems of discipline: isolation, exclusion and expulsion. Almost half of the UK prison population was permanently excluded from school. Many other public sector workers routinely work with the police, often to a greater degree than they personally find comfortable.

Black Lives Matter has renewed this

debate. The demand to defund the police has been coupled with calls for additional funding for public services, with a new, widespread acknowledgement of institutionalised racism in education, social care, and health care. Some activists have called to defund social workers, with one article in *New Republic* arguing: “if you measure in terms of the power to coerce, surveil, and inflict lasting harm, social workers are, thanks to the very nature of the job, cops by another name”.

State workers undoubtedly have bureaucratic power over the people they serve, but are they ‘soft cops’? In her article, *Soft Cops or Social Justice Activists...* (2021), Donna Baines defines the term, using a framework borrowed from Nicos Poulantzas, as those taking on “policing-type roles with a less explicitly aggressive approach, acting as gatekeepers of resources and contributing to the quieting of but not redressing social problems and injustice”. By this definition, many public sector workers are soft cops, blurring the distinction between the fundamentally repressive role of police in society and the complex, but ultimately necessary role, of most state workers.

COPS VS. SOFT COPS

The key difference between cops and ‘soft cops’ is their function in wielding state power. The police are part of what Louis Althusser called the Repressive State Apparatus: “the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc. [...] Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question ‘functions by violence’ – at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms).” Running alongside these institutions are Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) – education, trade unions, communications. The key distinction between Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses is important – the use of violence.

For example, in poorer, Black and Hispanic areas in the US in the 1990s, police were deployed in some schools. Around 20 years later, researchers found that students were arrested for minor offences like “using... phones, disrespecting teachers, and getting into loud arguments”; some students were injured or even killed in school by the police. Whereas teachers and other schoolworkers, as part of the Ideological State Apparatus, have power to enforce harmful state policies, they do not have the power to arrest or use physical



violence against their students. Although, in the past, teachers used corporal punishment to discipline students, the profession of teaching does not 'function by violence': corporal punishment is not an inherent aspect of teaching children Shakespeare. But violence is an inherent part of policing and the police fundamentally remain the executors of state violence.

FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Public sector workers are uniquely positioned to reconstruct public services through trade union organising. Their intimate knowledge of these services, coupled with their collective bargaining power, allows them to fight for improvements that directly benefit the communities they serve.

Even within the narrow scope of official collective bargaining, improving the conditions of frontline workers will have a positive impact for service users. At the time of writing, mental health social workers in Barnet, London, have been on strike for 72 days for improved pay. The UNISON branch has been clear from the outset that they are on strike not just to improve the livelihoods of their members, but to fight for a better service as well: to recruit and retain social workers and cut down waiting lists and caseloads.

Public sector workers have a vested interest in improving public services, as workers and as service users. An improvement in services improves the job. Going home to a community devastated by cuts to the welfare state underscores why we need meaningful change.

This relationship cuts both ways. Community organising and public protest can also aid the industrial struggles of workers – something especially important when unions are led by toothless officials unwilling to go on the offensive. In 2013, for example, a mass community campaign to save Lewisham Hospital from closure substituted for the healthcare unions, which failed to take decisive action.

THE VANGUARD OF TRADE UNIONISM

The need for organising public sector workers is more pressing than ever. Since the rise of Thatcherism, successive Conservative governments have systematically attacked trade union rights. This has concentrated organised labour primarily within the public sector, as manufacturing and heavy industries were killed off and union density evaporated. This, coupled with the austerity measures that have decimated public services, underscores the urgency of mobilising public sector workers to reclaim their rights and fight for systemic change.

As socialists we organise against oppression, but that doesn't mean turning our backs on the struggles of workers because they're not deemed to be "good enough". In 2023, passport control officers in airports became central to the pay campaign of PCS, the civil service union. Deemed industrially-useful – in the sense that a small group of workers could cause a lot of disruption through targeted action – other PCS members were charged a levy to pay these workers' strike pay. Looked at from a certain angle, this poses an uncomfortable situation for socialists who oppose the UK's oppressive border regime.

In recent weeks, the government's "shock Rwanda operation" has thrown this issue into sharper relief: with migrants being wrestled into immigration vans and taken to squalid detention centres, how do we relate to immigration enforcement officers? In 2021, border officers – also members of PCS – organised against a government policy which instructed them to turn back boats transporting migrants across the Channel. PCS said: "Our members were clear: they were completely opposed to the policy, which they considered unlawful, morally reprehensible and utterly inhumane." In 2022, the PCS launched a legal challenge against the Rwanda scheme, stating that it was "taking action on behalf of our

#METU SEXISM IN THE UNIONS

ALICE HAZEL

Sexual harassment is endemic to workplaces in the UK today. A 2020 government report noted that 29% of workers had experienced some form of sexual harassment in their workplace or work-related environment in the last 12 months. Of those, 57% had experienced unwanted, overtly sexual touching. This report concurred with earlier TUC surveys, which showed that those facing other forms of discrimination are more likely to face sexual harassment. The TUC found that 52% of women, 68% of LGBT+ people, 47% of those with disabilities and 57% of younger workers had been sexually harassed at work.

But these shocking figures do not reflect the whole picture. The impact of sexual harassment goes beyond the direct experience. When employers fail to deal with complaints seriously, the atmosphere in a workplace affects both the position (e.g. ability to stay in a job, progression, and ability to speak up) and the self-perception of workers most likely to face abuse. Sexual harassment is inextricably tied up with power relationships. Those on low pay, insecure contracts and in public-facing and 'junior' positions experience the brunt of it.

Feminists within the trade union movement have been at the forefront of campaigns against sexual harassment since the early 1980s. They pushed for recognition of the issue within a trade union movement that often portrayed them as prudish, and was slow to recognise 'women's issues' as union issues. These women won the argument and changes in trade union policy and legislation since that time reflect their efforts.

The gains have been diminished, however, by the broad shift from collective action towards individualistic, legalistic approaches, within the trade union movement and wider society. Despite many employers having formal sexual harassment policies, isolation is a key reason most people do not report or take action.

WIDESPREAD ABUSE

The collective organisation against sexual harassment in the trade unions, through #meTU, is very significant. Women have been bravely speaking out and building for industrial action over issues of bullying and sexual harassment within their own workplaces – the trade unions. In mid-April, GMB members who work in TSSA voted 93% in favour of strike action on an 86% turnout, in a dispute over workplace bullying and harassment and failures to follow agreed policies and procedures designed to create a better workplace culture.

This dispute originated in complaints made against the leadership of the union, which were investigated by the 2021 Conley and 2023 Kennedy reports. These uncovered a culture of extreme abuse, bullying and deep-rooted sexism, including incidents of "inappropriate and sexual touching, sexual assault, coercive and manipulative behaviour, violent and disrespectful language, humiliation and denigration." Kennedy commented that attitudes to organisation power dynamics, gender sex and race relations within the TSSA appeared to be "entrenched in a historic moment", and was alarmed to find this within an organisation that purports to stand for rights and justice.

In the GMB, similar issues were exposed in the Monaghan report, commissioned in 2022 following complaints against senior officials. Monaghan highlighted the structures of the union as one of the critical factors which allowed a culture of bullying and harassment to thrive. Dominance of long standing unelected male regional officers who run their regions "like fiefdoms" and clear job segregation with men holding more powerful, better-paid posts. Strike action (which was voted for by 83% of Unite members working within the North East, Yorkshire and Humber region of the GMB) has recently been paused as part of negotiations, with some suggestion that there will be a further independent audit of progress since the Monaghan report.

These issues affect lay reps and members, too. In the RCN, the 2022 Carr

report found a bullying, misogynistic and sexual culture, especially within the leading council, which was "seen to be run by middle-aged, white men". At that point, despite 90% of members being women and 45% coming from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, membership of the council was 60% white and male. Carr also reported a culture of sexual harassment surrounding the RCN's Annual Congress, including grooming of student members.

These issues are clearly not new. In 2016, complaints led to an internal report within Unite which found that half of its women officials claimed to have been bullied or sexually harassed by fellow officials. But the formation of #meTU has given a new momentum and a collective focus. It's welcome that other trade unions, including ASLEF and the FBU, have proactively commissioned surveys and investigations into the state of their organisations. These have shown the problem is not isolated to unions where individual whistleblowers have called out the leadership.

In the 2022 ASLEF survey, a quarter of female union members reported instances of work-based sexual harassment.



Allegations included rape or sexual assault by their male colleagues, banter, lewd jokes, and the display of explicit material, including at ASLEF events, especially alcohol-fuelled socials.

The FBU independent inquiry surveyed all women and black and minority ethnic members, alongside a random selection of other members. It found that 30% of women members had experienced sexual harassment by fellow members in a union context, including 15% in the last year. 30% of perpetrators were officials of some kind, at branch or brigade level. Only one-in-ten of those who experienced sexual harassment reported it to the union, with 50% saying they did not think they would be taken seriously. The February 2024 report concluded that the FBU “frequently fails to create psychologically or physically safe spaces for women.”

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack said: “It was and is clear that sexual harassment is a serious issue in both the fire service and in the trade union movement. We knew that we would not be immune.” Other unions, including those with majority women members, should follow suit by examining the experiences

of their members, as well as their politics, structures and processes.

WE NEED ACTION

Beyond establishing the scale of the problem, we need action. The FBU has responded to their inquiry findings by introducing training on sexual harassment for reps, linking the campaign against workplace harassment to countering harassment within the union. They will have an online hub with harassment policy and reporting processes, and are committed to a fuller action plan by June 2024. ASLEF have established reps training and a confidential reporting hotline, and are developing an ASLEF women's network.

This is all a start. However, the extent of toxicity exposed in all the recent reports shows a more thorough challenge is needed, both the backward attitudes that exist within parts of the movement and the closed structures that stultify these views.

Building solidarity with the workers taking industrial action should be a priority. As well as giving them support to win better conditions, this can be an inspiration for

others to organise collectively. #meTU should provide a focus for women challenging sexual harassment and bullying in their unions and workplaces more broadly.

We need a thoroughgoing project of democratisation throughout the labour movement, ensuring that members control what the union does – not out-of-touch bureaucrats on inflated salaries in the union's head office. The Carr Report into the RCN suggested that rules giving members rights to hold their leadership accountable led to a ‘lack of professionalisation’ in the union, and called for leaders to have greater freedom to make decisions. This is the opposite of what is needed. Instead, we need involvement and rank-and-file control, especially from young women, LGBT, BME and other underrepresented members to drive out discriminatory attitudes. We need a movement that campaigns on issues that affect workers in their diverse complex lives – sexual harassment, migrant rights, abortion, childcare, NHS, trans rights. The fight begins at home, in our own unions.

DEMANDS TO DEMOCRATISE OUR TRADE UNIONS AND FIGHT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

- Proactive, independent inquiries into bullying and harassment in all unions.
- Self-organised women's, black, disabled, LGBT+ and young members groups.
- Clear harassment policies and procedures in all unions.
- A prohibition on unions using Non-Disclosure Agreements in cases regarding harassment or discrimination.
- Increased democracy: support for workplace reps, open members meetings, transparent decision making, decisions taken by committees and conferences rather than individuals, etc.
- Maximum elected terms for officials at branch, regional and national levels
- Elections of all union officials, democratic control, and senior officials on a workers' wage.

Workers' Liberty members are organised into industrial “fractions” so we can support one another and collectively organise in our workplaces and trade unions. We have fractions for rail, education, health and local government workers, for workers in the fire service and civil servants, and for members of Unite.

Write to us to get involved:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org





REVIEW

WHO'S AFRAID OF GENDER?

MICHAEL BAKER

• Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Penguin, 2024.

Butler's back, and this time they're plain-speaking. The superstar academic's new book is an attempt to get under the skin and into the mind of the "anti-gender" movement, particularly its right-wing, evangelical contingent, and look at how trans people and 'gender theorists' have come to occupy such an outsized space in the minds of the global Right in the last decade or so.

It isn't until the acknowledgements

that we find the reason for Butler's turn towards this kind of thinking: in São Paulo, 2017, a conference they were due to speak at had a rally outside with a burning effigy of Butler themselves. In the city's airport, someone then attempted to attack them and their partner.

The book is not a personal reflection – if anything, it slightly underplays Butler's own significance in the development of 'gender theory' emerging as a discipline in the early 1990s. It is instead an attempt to think through the issue underlying the attack: where might such virulent

hatred have come from ideologically, what fuels and mobilises the movement against 'gender', and how might we more effectively fight against it?

The book is at its best in the early chapters, detailing the origins of what could be called an 'anti-gender' movement, and tracing its development through to the modern day. As is often the case, the Catholic Church bears a lot of the blame here. In the early 1990s, various church institutions and internal publications gave warnings about "gender" being a threat to "the family and biblical authority" – God gave us man and woman, husband and wife. Those who look to subvert this 'natural' duopoly look to subvert God's word. Even the current Pope Francis, who some consider more liberal than his predecessors, has denounced 'gender ideology' as no less a threat to humanity than nuclear warfare.

Starting from the church, ideas begin to spread outwards and take root. Evangelical Christian organisations, particularly in the US, begin to propagate the idea that the very concept of 'gender', as opposed to 'natural' or 'biological' sex, is an attack upon basic human freedoms, an external imposition on the nuclear family that threatens its very existence. Butler introduces the term 'phantasm' to describe the strange expansion that gender undergoes in this process: it becomes not just a dry descriptor used on birth certificates and passports, but a stand-in for much larger, and deliberately ill-defined, social fears. Threats of violence, the loss of social cohesion, a plot (there are some clear overlaps with antisemitic conspiracy theories here) to 'take over society'. This 'phantasmatic' fear is in the eye of the beholder; 'gender ideology' is whatever its opponents make of it.

Right-wing thinkers, writers and politicians stoke these fears, making 'gender' an ever-looser and more fearsome phenomenon, and using that fear to justify an increased state crackdown on whatever form 'gender' may take – be it trans people (trans kids, particularly) getting access to healthcare, toilets being made gender neutral, or judicial courts allowing for violence against trans people to be a legally-recognised form of discrimination.

It is ironic, given its name, that the 'anti-gender', or sometimes 'gender critical' movement is often so keen to insist on the importance of 'sex-based rights' or 'sex-based roles'. Gender first grew in

popularity as a term in the second wave feminist movement (think of Simone de Beauvoir: "one is not born, but becomes a woman"). Those feminists aimed precisely to rid gender roles of their power – to stop restrictive norms from getting in the way of people living their lives freely. The 'anti-gender' turn is, in fact, a reinforcement of the most restrictive aspects of gender and gendered roles: women are no more than child-bearers, mothers and housewives. Because trans women lack the first of these features, they must be shunned from the realm of womanhood altogether. This is a supposedly feminist argument to preserve a 'purity' that prior feminists have fought hard to do away with.

There is an overlap, too, with the longstanding struggle in the feminist movement for reproductive rights. Not only is the principle of bodily autonomy and equality under law shared by both causes, but the Right are also attacking on both fronts at once: groups like the World Congress of Families have pushed for restrictions on trans healthcare and for restricting access to abortions; politicians like Orban, Meloni, Trump and Bolsonaro have all made fear mongering about both 'gender ideology' and abortion central pillars of their political platforms.

Butler does not, as others sometimes do, conflate these overtly right-wing figures with feminists who have taken a trans-exclusionary stance. They call, ultimately, for feminists of all stripes to realise which side they are on. If you accept the support of right-wing movements that look to strip people of their rights, then those movements will turn on you in due course, too. The rebuttal of articles by

J.K. Rowling and Kathleen Stock (notably ignoring Stock's book on the subject, *Material Girls*) are good for what they are, but not a full-fledged response to a varied and contradictory movement. Butler is, however, absolutely right to insist that having these debates is much better than silo-ing the trans rights movement from those we disagree with – even if their disagreements are hateful or misguided. The anti-gender Right see gender as an all-encompassing evil, a 'phantasm'. For the trans rights movement to succeed, Butler argues, it needs to see itself as part of a correspondingly broad-based liberatory movement, which addresses questions of gender, sexuality, race, class, and even imperialism.

Sections towards the back of the book start to slip into Butler's older, denser writing style. Explaining something complex in clear, simple language is a deceptively difficult skill. It requires a careful attention to sentence structure and writing style, and very close familiarity with the topic at hand. For whatever reason, the carefully stripped-back sentences of the first half seem to cloud over and complicate again towards the end.

Readers should persevere, though, as these chapters contain some of the book's most fascinating insights: discussing the origins of the term 'gender' in the deeply flawed experiments of the sexologist John Money; an examination of how the history of slavery, and white doctors experimenting on female slaves, may have fundamentally altered how race and sex interact with one another; a summary of recent scientific debates around

the idea that 'biological sex' is not as stable, simple and objective a category as we once thought; and the complex and innovative ways people across the world have translated and discussed the English-language concept of 'gender', colliding with other languages and cultures to change the way people think about themselves in gendered terms.

This book will not convince many people to stop being transphobic. It picks its targets quite selectively, and the arguments it makes do not take subtle differences or disagreements within the incredibly broad 'anti-gender' camp into account. Nor is it a 'primer' on trans people, gender and the trans rights movement that you should recommend to an uninitiated friend or relative. For both of those purposes, something like Shon Faye's *The Transgender Issue* is a much better starting place.

Who's Afraid of Gender? is not without its flaws. The prose slips in and out of academese. It talks very little of positive political movements and ongoing struggles that could model correct behaviour or a path to political change. It uses an overly abstract and simplistic definition of fascism to try and shoehorn various far-right politicians and bits of transphobic rhetoric into one easy catch-all. Regardless, the book is a well-argued, deliberately provocative, and often fascinating read. It should be able to provide the left with some useful lessons, and either fuel new discussions, or contribute to ongoing ones.



IRELAND'S LOST REFERENDA

NATALIA CASSIDY

On 8th March, the Irish public voted on two sets of amendments to the Irish constitution – the Care Bill and the Family Bill.

The Care Bill proposed to overturn Ireland's long-time constitutional commitment to emphasising the role of women in the home, as well as the duty of the state to ensure that mothers are not obligated by economic necessity to engage in paid labour to the detriment of domestic labour. These articles would be replaced by more neutral language on recognising the provision of care by family members to one another, with the state striving to support such provision.

The Family Bill was aimed at moving away from marriage as the only basis for family. While enshrining the family as "the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society" and "a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights", the amended article recognised that it could be "founded on marriage or on other durable relationships". The Bill would have retained the state's duty "to guard with special care the institution of Marriage and to protect it against attack", but removed the notion that the family is "founded" on marriage.

The Yes campaign was supported by the current Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party government as well as opposition parties Labour, the Social Democrats, People Before Profit and Sinn Féin. Despite this support, and in spite of opposition coming from relatively marginal right wing parties Independent Ireland and Aontú, both Bills were roundly defeated in the March referenda. On a 44% turnout, 68% rejected the Family Bill and 73% rejected the Care Bill. Only one constituency in the entire country (Dún Laoghaire in south east Dublin) voted Yes on the Family Bill and nowhere was there a majority for the Care Bill.

The government was criticised by opposition parties for rushing the referenda, with very little time being given to campaigning, and for its confusing and lacklustre messaging. Sinn Féin initially promised that, if elected, it would rerun the referenda with strengthened wording on the duty of the state to provide care, but has since signalled a u-turn on this.

The Catholic Church was a significant voice in the campaign, with Irish bishops issuing a statement in opposition to the proposed constitutional changes over concerns that they would diminish the "unique importance" of marriage and make young people less likely to get married.

Fears over immigration were also brought into play by opponents of the constitutional amendments, drawing on a rise in anti-migrant mobilisation in Ireland. Recent years have witnessed protests against direct provision centres where asylum seekers are housed in temporary accommodation in rural areas. Two of these proposed sites were set on fire by far-right protestors, and in November anti-migrant riots broke out in Dublin after a woman and three children were stabbed by a naturalised Irish citizen. If "durable relationships" other than marriage could be the basis for family life, critics argued, then it would be easier for refugees to bring in relatives under family reunification rules.

The proposed Bills do have genuine problems and it would be wrong to say that opposition to the bills came exclusively from the right or from the Church. The disability campaign group Equality not Care campaigned for a No vote in the Care bill, stating that the new amendment acknowledging family carers would perpetuate the notion of disabled people being burdens on their families rather than equal rights-holders. The campaign group is clear that it is not in favour of the current wording but called for people to reject the proposed changes in order to seek stronger changes in future.

Ireland is experiencing crises in housing and across many areas of public provision. Just like in the UK, this has proved to be fertile ground for the insurgent anti-migrant right. The defeat of March's referenda, against the wishes of almost every major political party, bore this out. While the proposed reforms were not perfect, they could have been a step forward in recognising a greater range of relationships, decoupling the family unit from the institution of marriage. It seems likely that Sinn Féin will be the leading partner in the next government. If they do rerun the referenda, it will be interesting to see how much emphasis they put on clearing up the wording, and how much ground they give to anti-immigrant sentiment and Catholic conservatism.

- The lost referenda come only a few years after the victory of the campaign to overturn Ireland's abortion ban.





• Sue Crockford and Mica Nava with their babies at the Oxford Women's Liberation Conference, 1970.

A LABOUR OF LOVE

HISTORY

Amy Todd is studying for a PhD at the University of Manchester and the People's History Museum, focusing on the publication *Red Rag* (1972-1980). She is currently pregnant and living the very real contradictions of maternity.

In 1969, feminists formulated the first four demands of the Women's Liberation Movement: equal pay, equal opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, and 24-hour nurseries. Motherhood was (in the words of feminist historian Sarah Crook) "discussed endlessly" within the movement.

That's not to say that everyone thought

of motherhood in the same way. Socialist feminists, revolutionary feminists and radical feminists were rarely found to agree on topics, especially those pertaining to women's reproductive labour. In their 2011 article 'Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction', historians Gerda Neyer and Laura Bernardi describe the difficult relationship between motherhood and feminism: "Motherhood has been one of the issues which have split feminist movements. Most women become mothers, and many feminists have regarded motherhood as a unifying element among women and have based their claims to rights for women on it. On the other hand, the issue of motherhood has also been one of the anchor points for

denying women rights and equality and for discriminating against them."

As Simone De Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* (1953), maternity is a contradictory experience: "maternity is a strange compromise of narcissism, altruism, dream, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism." Whilst the relationship between maternity and women's liberation remained fractious and tense, interpreting and understanding motherhood was of paramount importance to the movement.

The tensions between motherhood and women's liberation is described by Sarah Crook as an "area of creative discontent for British feminism". A major feature of the Women's Liberation Movement was the prolific production of feminist press. Notable examples, including *Red Rag*, *Spare Rib*, *Shrew* and *Scarlet Women*, are rich catalogues of material written about and by mothers. *Spare Rib* editor Marsha Rowe even described her experience in reproductive terms: "I remembered my first feminist involvement in the early seventies as a time which felt like being reborn in slow stages" and describes *Spare Rib* as a "daughter of the underground press".

These publications offered a space for discussion, disagreement and the development of ideas, theory, and activism on the topic of motherhood.

Readers were able to write in and share their views, their experiences, and their future hopes on the subject.

MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERING

The focus on the role of the mother, and the need to reclaim, reframe or reject the role of women emerged from the socioeconomic climate of the post-war period. Rising numbers of women workers, coupled with the accessibility of more consumer goods, were meant to free women from the drudgery of reproductive labour. But even with legislation such as the Equal Pay Act (1975), women were working more than ever before. Economist Nancy Folbre argues that "capitalist development has weakened patriarchal institutions, giving women more individual

freedom but making mothers and other caregivers more economically vulnerable".

With the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement in 1969, maternity re-emerged as a subject to be studied, analysed and recorded within academic and activist circles, building on literature from the so-called "first wave" of feminism. This led to an increase in public recognition of the labour of motherhood, but as Wages for Housework co-founder Silvia Federici states, this recognition wasn't always welcome: "We are suspicious when we hear the press and the politicians celebrating motherhood and our capacity to love and care".

In the academic world, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience*

and *Institution* is often cited as the start of Motherhood Studies as a field of knowledge. Rich distinguishing between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, which is not inherently oppressive.

The socialist feminist community around *Red Rag* were particularly keen to communicate that "mother" was not a homogenous category: "the verb 'to mother' cannot be understood as a monolithic category of practice". To this end, representations of working mothers, single mothers, lesbian mothers, mothers who relied on benefits, black mothers, were all represented within the fifteen volumes of the publication.

In the article 'Gayness and Liberalism' in *Red Rag* No.6 (1975), Marxist Elizabeth Wilson writes about the lesbian communities she was part of in the 1960s and the discrimination faced by those who wanted to become parents. Welfare officers, representatives of the state, intervened on behalf of children adopted or born into lesbian households because, as Wilson explains, this challenged a patriarchal society: "The lesson to myself of my life during the decade of the Sixties is that I could be tolerated as a homosexual provided I could be stereotyped. That way, I did not challenge society by wanting, for instance, to bring up children."

FOUR SISTERS

The article 'Four Sisters' was written collectively by Nell Myers, Adah Kay, Annie Mitchell and Valerie Charlton in *Red Rag* No.11 (1978). Annie Mitchell (also known as Ann Mitchell) has had a long and illustrious TV, film and theatre career since the 1970s and is still on screens today. In the same volume she writes the poem, 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall' where she shares the perspective of an overworked, anxious and depressed mother and the mundanity she is experiencing in her prison of a home: "Does she want to do a wee? She might. Such an effort to unzip the fly. She's going to let it run down her legs. Warm, smelly liquid. Look at her. She's paddling in a pool of piss. Kids piss, cats piss, any old piss. Soon I'll be able to do the washing up."

Later in the volume, she shares another poetic piece co-authored by Nell Myers (an American feminist and trade unionist who went on to be the editor of *The Miner* – the newspaper of the NUM). The piece is prefaced: "Ann and Nell are two women who have been married and are now bringing up their children alone".

• Cover of *Red Rag* No.10.



Suddenly, her poem 'Mirror, Mirror...', in which an isolated mother struggles with unpaid reproductive labour, transforms from poetry to reality.

'Four Sisters' was written in 1978, as national conferences became increasingly fractious, and separatist groups, such as Black and Lesbian groups, were emerging. The authors adopt a defensive and careful tone. They also feel the need to defend families and motherhood from calls for family abolition: "We have come to feel that women's liberation should not be correlated with breaking up or destroying relationships, but rather with enabling and supporting constructive processes of change. The painful attempts of many women to work through to new possibilities in coupling, either with each other, or with men, require political attention; not 'cold' political, but 'warm' political; supportive and constructive."

Overall the piece asks the movement to support mothers – they feel that a movement that once centred on mothers has now moved away from earlier socialist feminist analysis. The authors state that they broadly agree with *Red Rag* and broader Marxist feminist analysis on women's oppression in the home and family, but appeal to the diverse range of views on the family within the movement. These four authors are living the very real, material conditions of motherhood and ask that lived experience not be subordinated to theory: "We feel that the simplistic extension of such analysis is, to put it bluntly, 'smash the family'; we cannot at this stage accept such a conclusion as a basis for action. Our current reality is that while we have had our consciousness raised, we are struggling with concrete family situations."

THREE MEANINGS

The cover of *Red Rag* No.10 (opposite) shows the plurality and contradictions of labour and love, teasing out different interpretations. Labour, the act of birthing new life, women's paid and unpaid labour, and the Labour movement – all three interpretations go to the heart of the socialist feminism documented in the pages of *Red Rag*. The image, taken from a GDR poster, depicts women working in a factory. One of the women is pregnant and therefore performing two labouring tasks. The workers, and indeed the children in her stomach, are depicted with the red scarves of the revolutionary working class. The women here are class conscious, they are politically aware, and they are capable workers.



JANINE BOOTH

POETRY

Janine Booth is *Women's Fightback's* poetry editor. She is a disaffected middle-aged woman who travels the UK and beyond delivering ranting, rhyming, revolting poetry. She is involved in Loud Women, NeurodiVERSE and Poetry on the Picket Line.

POKE YOUR WOKE

If your boss is a tosser and your job is boring
If your team doesn't even look like scoring
If people hold a protest that you don't support
If you wear a balaclava but you still get caught
If your Daily Mail goes up in smoke
Then that's because the world's gone woke

If school tells your kids it's OK to be gay
If you can't park your van 'cause there's a cripple in the way
If you've lost your wallet or you can't find your key
If you can't make a meal that costs 30p
If your dog won't bark and your frog won't croak
Then mark my words, it's because they're woke

If you're not invited to the coming-out party
You can put the blame on the wokerati
If some wit on Twitter owns your arse
trashes your culture war and centres class
If no-one laughs at your racist joke
Then turn your angry fire on 'woke'

If your eyes don't shine and your teeth don't sparkle
You can blame it all on Meghan Markle
If a woman gets promoted instead of you
If someone prangs your car but you don't know who
If your local market's stocking artichoke
If the egg on your gammon has a broken yolk
It's a blight on the rights of the normal bloke
Bring back bigotry – and banish woke!



TAKING ON THE RACISTS

THE LEGENDARY SARI SQUAD

HISTORY

2024 marks 40 years since the beginning of the 1984-5 miners' strike.

Jill Mountford was a student and militant at the time, and a founding member of Florence Colliery Women's Support Group and North Staffordshire Women Against Pit Closures.

One of the earliest political discussions we had in the Florence Colliery Women's Support Group, outside of the politics of the strike, was about Afia Begum and the Sari Squad who had run her defence campaign. Like most political discussions we had, it took place occasionally on a picket line and mostly in the student union minibus we had commandeered from North Staffs Polytechnic. This discussion

started with Thatcher's racist immigration laws and developed into a discussion about racism in a broader sense, solidarity beyond the miners' strike, and how we have so much more uniting us with the other sections of the working class than dividing us.

Afia Begum, 19-years old, and her daughter Asma, 18-months old, arrived in the UK in June 1982 on a visa granted at the beginning of that year. Expecting to be met at Heathrow Airport by her father, who had lived in the UK for 26 years, she was, instead, greeted by immigration officials who told her she was to return to Bangladesh. Why? Because her husband Abdul Hamid had been killed in a fire ten weeks earlier. He was living in a slum tenement on Brick Lane, in the East End

of London, having been in the UK for more than decade. The only heating in his flat was a paraffin oil heater, and on 15 March when a curtain caught fire and spread, Hamid was killed. Grieving over her husband, and desperate to be with her family in the UK, Afia was devastated by the Home Office decision to deport her.

Afia was granted a temporary stay to sort out her husband's affairs, and when the impending deportation date drew closer she and Asma went into hiding. So far this was a private affair between a young grieving widow and the Home Office armed with racist immigration laws. Then, in November 1982, Afia's cause was taken up by a group of young South Asian women: the Sari Squad. They were self-assured, talented and full of energy fuelled by injustice. They were part of a confident, no-messing movement of young South Asians in Britain, organising and fighting back against racism and oppression, amid an active far-right fascist movement in the UK. Violent, sometimes lethal street attacks were commonplace, firebombing was frequent in certain parts of the UK, and racist police and laws the norm. Discriminatory practices meant poor education, poor job opportunities, and slum housing were the lot of black and asian people in Britain at this time.

ASIAN YOUTH MOVEMENTS

Asian youth had started to organise in the late 1970s. They called themselves Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) and were often organised across religious divides. Some were influenced by Indian Communist Party and Maoist politics. Bradford was central to the AYM's but they existed in Sheffield, Manchester, Dewsbury, Nottingham, Leicester, Coventry, Southall and Newham, and in smaller towns across the North of England.

The picture printed across the membership cards of the Manchester AYM was of three young Asians, two of whom were women. At their first public meeting they had Amrit Wilson speak about Asian women in Britain. The women's wing of AYM's were a minority but their existence was important. The general focus of AYM's on racism rather than gender issues: in the case of Jaswinder Kaur, who had left her abusive husband and was then threatened with deportation, the emphasis of the campaign launched in her defence was on the racist immigration laws and not on domestic violence, for instance. That said, several AYM's supported Southall Black Sisters' campaigns on the subject, such as the case of Iqbal Begum who killed

her violent husband. She received a life sentence after pleading guilty to murder, believing "guilty" meant "gulti", which is Punjabi for mistake. She did not have access to an interpreter in court.

FIGHTING DEPORTATION

The Sari Squad and Afia Begum's cause was part of this landscape. The Sari Squad was remembered, and perhaps a little romanticised, by Benjamin Zephaniah in an interview he did with the *Guardian* in 2016. He called them "the legendary Sari Squad" and said "[they] were experts in various martial arts and ready and willing to take on any racists who would try to spoil our fun. They fought with style and would often burst into song after seeing off any attackers." I don't know about that, but I do know they were driven and talented, and got Afia Begum's name and cause known far and wide. They even got coverage in the *Big Mamma Rag* in the US. Women's Groups, anti-racist groups, student unions, and trade union branches were garnered by the Sari Squad in support of the campaign for Afia Begum.

Afia Begum was issued with her fifth deportation warrant from the Home Office in August 1983, and on 15 August the Sari Squad chained themselves to the railings outside the home of Leon Brittan, Thatcher's Home Secretary. They were arrested, kept overnight and humiliated and sexually abused by police in the cells of Rochester Police Station. As one of them later recalled, "Ghazala and another woman refused. They were taken to

another room, their saris removed and dragged back in front of the male officers in just an underskirt and a very thin piece of material on top. "I took off my own sari and then properly stripped. They felt us up. They used their hands."

They were originally charged with obstruction but this was changed to a breach of the peace when it came to trial because that was the only way they could justify having kept the women overnight. None of it was held up in court. The *Times* reported: "The women who appeared at Horseferry Road Court, were: Palavi Parekh, aged 21, of Victoria Road, Aston, Birmingham; Nita Datta, aged 20, unemployed, of Nicholson Road, Sheffield; Parajati Teare, aged 29, and Ghazala Faizi, aged 26, a community worker, from Alverstone House, Kennington Park Estate, Kennington, South London."

When the Sari Squad organised a meeting in Parliament hosted by Labour MP Harry Cohen, more than 200 people attended. Cohen and Jeremy Corbyn raised Afia's case in Parliament and met with David Waddington, a minister in the Home Office, who said that the case deserved further consideration. Yet, as the sun was rising on 3 May 1984, the police arrested Begum at an address on Brick Lane. With no time to wash and dress, she was taken with Asma in a van to Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre. The work of the Sari Squad had got Afia's case sufficient attention that it was set to go to the European Court of Human Rights.

A Dutch Socialist councillor, Tara Singh, contacted the British Home office to say she was prepared to take Afia and Asma into her home in Amsterdam until the case was heard. With 200 people protesting at Heathrow Airport, Afia and Asma Begum were forced onto a plane at 10am on 8 May. When the plane stopped in Amsterdam a short while later they were not allowed to get off. This was spiteful, mean and inhumane.

Compare and contrast the case of Zola Budd which took place in the same year. The anti-apartheid movement was reaching its peak in the UK and elsewhere. South Africa was a pariah state and sanctions meant it could not take part in international sporting events. Yet Zola Budd, a young white South African athlete, was granted British nationality by descent at the discretion of the Home Secretary, so she could be part of the Great Britain Olympic squad in the 1984 games. This decision followed a positive campaign by the *Daily Mail* who had, of course, given Afia Begum's case only negative press.

The miners' strike dominated the domestic political landscape in Britain in 1984-5. The British state was throwing its might behind the Thatcherite cause to smash trade unionism. But there were many other attacks on working class people at that time. Racism and the use of racist laws were not put on hold while the state battered the miners. They were, instead, carried out with malice and ferocity.



A NEW CHANCE FOR ABORTION LIBERALISATION IN GERMANY?

JANA HOESS

In Germany, abortion is covered by section 218 of the criminal code. It is listed as an "offence against life", alongside murder and manslaughter. A person receiving an abortion escapes punishment only if it is carried out during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and if the pregnant person has received counselling from an authorised advisor and has waited three days before the procedure. The prohibition of abortion is based on laws first conceived in 1871, which were later reintroduced in 1933, in the early stages of Nazi rule.

For sixteen years between 2005 and 2021, Germany had governments headed by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), led by Angela Merkel. This held the country back from necessary social change in many areas, including having an open and fact-based conversation about abortion rights.

Since late 2021, a new coalition has taken over, consisting of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green Party, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). This new coalition, in the second year of its administration, set up an expert commission to look at the prospect of reform to the abortion laws. The specific focus of this commission, which consisted entirely of women experts, was to explore ways abortion could be regulated outside of the criminal code, effectively decriminalising it. Such a decriminalisation would open the door to coverage of abortion procedures by public health insurance.

In April 2024, the commission concluded that the legal situation in Germany is incompatible with international and EU public law, as well as the country's own constitution. Its suggestion for decriminalisation extends, however, only to abortions conducted in the early stages of the pregnancy. While it deemed "The fundamental illegality of abortion in the early stages of pregnancy [...] not sustainable" it still recommends the prohibition of abortions beyond the stage when a foetus is able to survive on its own outside the womb.

The parties of the coalition have been lukewarm to the findings of the report, however. The Minister for Health, Karl Lauterbach (SPD), commended the commission for its "excellent work", while the Minister for Women, Lisa Paus (Green Party), called it a good basis for the necessary conversation on the topic. The minister of justice, Heiko Buschman (FDP), said the report would need to be analysed in detail. Similarly, the leaderships of all three parties have been quick to dampen the hopes of activists and people affected by the subject. There will not be any changes to the way abortion is regulated in Germany for the immediate future. Instead, the governing parties stress the need for a measured debate that does not cause division within society.

The divide on abortion is, according to polls, already widely overcome. Independent representative studies indicate that a strong majority of citizens already support the decriminalisation of abortion for the early stage pregnancies suggested by the commission. 80% think that the consultation and waiting period before an abortion should not be legally required. 75% object to the fact that abortion is regulated in the criminal code.

The reality is that in September of 2024, Germany is facing major elections in three of its federal states: Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Saxony. The polls show all three parties of the coalition floundering, with the FDP in particular having to fret for every seat in the state



parliaments. The right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AFD) is surging in the polls, and the CDU is also gaining support. So, it might be that rather than being concerned about further dividing society, it is political interests that are motivating the reluctance of the parties to act on the findings of the commission they themselves set up.

This is the second time the SPD have sacrificed their commitments to revise abortion laws in Germany in favour of their own electoral self-interest. The Green Party have gone very quiet on the issue and clearly do not consider it a priority, despite it having been among their election promises in 2021. The FDP is equally showing no interest in rocking the boat, instead focussing on appeasing and catering to their very specific group of supporters. All of this despite the fact that changing abortion laws was incorporated into the coalition agreement.

With less than two years left on the clock for this administration, it is highly unlikely that there will be a serious political discussion on changing the law regulating abortion. People seeking abortions will be the ones living with the consequences of the electoral calculations made by the governing parties. They will continue to be stigmatised. They will continue to face the fear of criminal investigations. They will continue to face insecurity and risk health complications, either from unsafe abortions or from being forced to carry a pregnancy to term against their will.



DECRIMINALISE ABORTION NOW!

In May, a young woman and her partner faced court, having obtained pills to terminate a pregnancy after the legal term limit. She was 19. The pair are the latest on a growing list of people, overwhelmingly women and girls, being investigated, charged and imprisoned for illegal abortions.

In England, Scotland and Wales, abortion is legal up to 24 weeks, and only then with the approval of two doctors. Abortions after 24 weeks are allowed only in cases where the woman's life is in danger, if there is a severe foetal abnormality or if the woman is at risk of grave physical and mental injury. Obtaining an illegal abortion carries a sentence up to life imprisonment.

Abortion provider MSI Reproductive Choices says it knows of up to 60 criminal inquiries in England and Wales since 2018. There were almost none prior to this. These investigations are invasive and extremely distressing.

One couple was placed under criminal investigation after their son was born at home, three months premature. The mother had sought an abortion when she had discovered she was pregnant, but had been told that she was over the 24-week limit. When she gave birth, complications meant that she had to perform CPR on her newborn. Her husband called an ambulance and their son survived. Her husband was later arrested on suspicion of procuring an illegal abortion, and the pair were subjected to a year-long investigation, before charges were eventually dropped in January this year.

In June last year, mother-of-three Carla Foster was imprisoned after being found guilty of inducing an abortion after the legal term limit. After spending several weeks in prison, her sentence was reduced on appeal and she was released.

Bethany Cox, also charged with carrying out an illegal abortion, had her case dropped in January this year due to "evidential difficulties" on the part of the CPS. A statement by her KC said it was an

"extraordinary state of affairs" that "in the throes of grief" Cox was interviewed by police and placed under investigation for three years.

In total, six women have appeared in court in the last 18 months.

The implementation of the pills-by-post scheme in 2020 was an important step forward for our reproductive rights, giving people the opportunity to have abortions in their own home at minimal cost. The sharp increase in criminal investigations is a kick back against this progress, and reflects a wider "culture war" aimed at curtailing women's reproductive freedom.

On 15 May, as this issue of *Women's Fightback* was going to press, Parliament was due to debate a series of amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill. One amendment, submitted by Tory MP Caroline Ansell, seeks to reduce the legal term limit from 24 to 22 weeks, curtailing the rights of pregnant people even further.

Another amendment, tabled by Labour MP Diana Johnson, would, if successful, mean that no woman could be prosecuted for ending a pregnancy, including in cases of abortion past the legal term limit. Johnson's amendment would be a huge step forward for reproductive rights in this country, but voting on the amendment was delayed for the second time, with no date yet set.

Workers' Liberty supports the full decriminalisation of abortion, including the abolition of term limits. We believe in abortion as early as possible and as late as necessary: no one should face prison for choosing to end a pregnancy. To force someone to stay pregnant against their wishes is an affront to the principle of bodily autonomy. It is our right to choose.

Are you a member of the Labour Party or a trade union? Pass our motion for the decriminalisation of abortion:
bit.ly/motion-abortiondecrim

BELARUSIAN DISSIDENTS FACE PRISON

MICHAEL BAKER

Belarusian trade unionist Olga Brytikova was arrested on 11 August 2023. She has not yet been sentenced, but is expected to be handed a long prison term over her support for political and social change in Belarus.

Brytikova was not politically active prior to the Belarusian protests of 2020. She became an independent election observer, and then took part in the protests of August 2020, delivering a statement on behalf of workers at Naftan, the company she had worked at for 16 years.

Brytikova was fired in December of that year, and was soon after elected chair of the independent trade union at Naftan. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Brytikova spent a total of 105 days behind bars for anti-war posts on social media, bearing and displaying anti-war slogans in public, and illegal picketing (protesting) against the war. She has repeatedly refused to leave Belarus.

Olga's latest arrest took place alongside the arrest of Alexander Khukharyonak, leader of the Naftan strike committee and the first to call a strike at the workplace in 2020. On 30 March, Workers' Liberty joined Belarusian activists in a small protest at the Belarusian embassy calling for the release of all political prisoners in Belarus.

WORKERS' LIBERTY SUMMER CAMP 2024

A weekend of fires, partying, nature, good food and socialism. Family friendly. All welcome!

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More information and tickets:
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• Protest in support of draft refuser Sofia Orr (third from right), February 25, 2024.

REFUSING TO SERVE

INTERVIEW

In 2022, at the age of 19, Einat Gerlitz publicly refused to enlist in the Israeli military. "My friends say that serving in the army is the opportunity of a lifetime," she wrote at the time, "but I think that the act of refusing is my chance to use my privilege as an Israeli Jew in order to actively change our cruel reality."

All Israelis face conscription as they enter adulthood. Men must perform 32 months of national service, and women 24 months; everyone is then retained as a recallable reservist up to the age of 40. Millennials and Gen Z have become the demographic basis for the new left in Europe and North America. In Israel, ethnonationalism is inverting this trend. One poll (conducted before 7 October 2023) showed that 73% of 18-24 year-

olds identified with the political right, compared to just 46% of over 65s. During the latest Gaza war, the political mood has become even more febrile.

This context makes the latest cohort of young Israelis refusing to join the military (or refuseniks) all the more precious and impressive. Tal Mitnick was jailed in December when he refused. In February, he was joined by Sophie Orr, and in April a third conscientious objector, Ben Arad, refused. All three were 18, and all have faced time in prison. "Despite the commanders and military system controlling when I eat, stand, sit, and sleep", Mitnick wrote from his cell, "what keeps me strong is knowing that what they cannot control is what I think."



The organisation at the centre of the refusenik movement is Mesarvot, a network of Israeli youth dedicated to supporting people who refuse to serve in the military. *Women's Fightback* spoke to Einat Gerlitz, now 21, who is an activist with Mesarvot, about her experiences.

REFUSAL

Gerlitz's immediate family were not political activists, though she did have some left-Zionist political lineage; her grandmother had been involved in Mapam, the forerunner of the leftist party Meretz, in the 1990s. Her parents brought her up to interrogate the world: "I was never connected to violent patriotism – the macho 'let's go to war' kind of vibe."

She began to be active politically at high school. "I came out. I started to go to queer liberation protests, and from there I went on to climate activism. That's what opened my eyes. I saw how different struggles are intertwined – the queer struggle, the climate struggle, the socialist struggle, feminism. For the first time I had friends who were interested in politics. I met my first Palestinian friends. That's the first time that I really saw that we live in the same place but in completely different realities."

In preparation for joining the military, Israeli youth sit tests from the age of 16. They are told to strive for a "meaningful

service" to the Israeli state. Gerlitz did the first of these tests but then, she says, "I started to feel like something was wrong." Initially, her plan was to get through her two years and forget about it as quickly as she could. "But I started to realise that I didn't believe in their definition of 'meaningful service'. I decided to stop going to the tests and, through a friend of a friend, found the Mesarvot network."

Even if it didn't land you in prison, the decision not to serve is a difficult one. Everyone, including Gerlitz, has family who have given years of their life to the military. In a country steeped in militarism, refusing carries a social and personal cost. Many do so quietly, seeking an exemption for health reasons. "I chose to do it not only because I care about the future of this place, but also because it's an opportunity to use my privilege for all of those who refuse but don't have the option to do it publicly."

When Gerlitz left school, she did a year of volunteer work which postponed the date of her conscription, but she was eventually called up on 4 September 2022. When she refused, she was sent to prison. "When I went in I had no idea whether it would be for two weeks or two years. You never know."

PRISON

But she wasn't alone. Three other teenagers publicly refused alongside her, and a protest gathered to back her as she went into the military centre. Crucial to this was Mesarvot, who gave Gerlitz support, including a lawyer.

The act of refusal is, says Gerlitz, "not in the mainstream at all, not even on the left". "There are two kinds of leftists in Israel: some support refusal, and some think that we should be the good soldier in the blockade." The question for Gerlitz is which strategy is more likely to end the occupation – and joining the military isn't it. "We need to resist stronger than that. It's not enough to be part of the system even if we're trying to be the best we can, still taking part in war crimes with no political agreement in sight."

Refusers are often jailed, and when released are given a new enlistment date. When they refuse again, they are jailed again. This happened to Gerlitz on four separate occasions. Only after these four stints in prison, 87 days in total, was she permitted to appeal to a military-run 'Conscientious Committee'. It did, finally, grant her an exemption.

The only 'political' exemption which Israel permits is on the grounds of pacifism, and the process in front of the Conscientious Committee is gruelling. "They check if you're pacifist with really invasive questions, asking about rape, about the Nazis, about many different things. Many people, including me, leave crying. The criteria for the decision isn't shared with the public. Neither are the number of people appealing to the committee, or how many people get exemptions, or how many people are imprisoned for refusal."

Her time in prison was "tough at times", though, she emphasises, "nothing like administrative detention that Palestinians go through. I had three meals a day and a bed to sleep on. When I wanted to call my lawyer, I could. But it is tough sitting in prison, especially not knowing for how long it's going to be. The women's department is strict. There's only about 30-40 women, many imprisoned for very minor crimes: smoking weed or running away from the army or not enlisting. The General in charge is very proud that it's the toughest department of the prison. She's the only head of department that's a woman and she's very proud that it has the toughest and harshest discipline."

The role of women in the Israeli military is of great symbolic value, both at home and abroad. Since the 7 October attacks, there has been a huge surge in women volunteering for front line combat roles. Social media is littered with photos of women soldiers posing with guns and other equipment. To some feminists, including in the West, this is a model of empowerment. "Liberal Jewish feminism in Israel is crazy," Gerlitz exclaims, "They say 'we can be as aggressive as the guys. We can kill Palestinians too!' I want feminism to be deeper than that, to be the alternative."

AFTER OCTOBER 7

The Hamas attacks of 7 October have fundamentally altered the situation in Israel, especially for the refusenik movement. "The atmosphere when I refused is not the same as what is going on now. It's also probably going to change again in a few months. Things are very dynamic. People want revenge. There is a lot of pain and a lot of trauma."

It's also important, Gerlitz says, for people in the UK and elsewhere to understand how different the coverage of the massacre in Gaza is in Israel. "What you see is not what the regular Israeli sees. It's not the same news. Palestinian civilians dying is not something that's talked about.

Starvation is not talked about – it's seen as just a side-effect of the war." According to most polls, a majority of Israelis think that the actions of the military have not gone far enough. One, published by the Times of Israel in March, found that 75% of the population backed a full-scale assault on Rafah, although other polls have pointed to growing popular support for a ceasefire in return for the release of Israeli hostages.

The far right have made hay, pushing the re-establishment of settlements in Gaza and blocking trucks delivering humanitarian aid. "It's very scary to be critical," says Gerlitz. "It's easier for me to speak to you in English, knowing that it's going to be published abroad, and probably met with support. In Israel, speaking against the war in public is very scary. Many people have been threatened, by the far right, by the police."

Dissidents face persecution. In November, 62-year-old Meir Baruchin was sacked from his job as a history teacher after posting about Palestinian rights. On arrest, his hands and feet were bound and his phone confiscated. Five detectives ransacked his home to look for 'evidence', and he was charged with Intention to Commit Treason. A judge ruled that

Baruchin should be held in solitary confinement, where he remained for four days without a change of clothes or a book. On his release, he won a legal case against his employer and the police, and was reinstated in his job, but he quickly left the school after a campaign of intimidation from students, who had been excused from class to spit and shout at him. Some of them will soon be joining the military.

Gerlitz has a friend, a fellow refuser, who was visited by police, had her house searched and was put under house arrest. "It feels like Palestinians and Israelis that believe in non-violence are in a minority", says Gerlitz. "At the beginning of the war we couldn't speak up or protest at all – Palestinian citizens of Israel that posted "stop the war" on social media were arrested. As a Jew I am more able than Palestinian citizens to speak up." Immediately after our interview, Gerlitz was planning to go to a demonstration in Jerusalem where "me and all my friends are going and we might be arrested, and we're ready for that."

Gerlitz is sanguine about the prospects for political change in Israel. It's true, she says, that the pressure for a ceasefire is not strong enough. But the war has

destabilised the government. The period prior to the war was a moment of mass unrest against Netanyahu and his proposed judicial reforms. He seems destined to fall as soon as the war is over. "There are many people, even on the right – residents of the cities and villages around the Gaza border – saying they feel disappointed and betrayed. I don't think people ever imagined that a massacre [by Hamas] would be so big. And I don't know anyone ever imagined that the war in Gaza would be so horrific."

In a society dominated by racism, nationalism and violence, a movement of teenagers is leading the way. If there is a path to a just peace in Palestine and Israel, it is likely to involve them. "This reality hides behind the one-sided Zionist narrative that we learned," Gerlitz wrote in her refusal statement in 2022. "The generations before us did not build the nation on empty lands, but built the nation on top of Palestinians who lived there before. We are not better than the Palestinians. They deserve the same basic democratic rights, the same independence, the same access to water, freedom of movement, education, and a secure life."

A portrait of Einat Gerlitz, a young woman with short, dark, curly hair and round glasses, wearing a green sweater. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is blurred, showing a red flag on the left and a building with a yellow wall on the right.

Einat Gerlitz



Sofia Orr

LETTERS FROM PRISON

Sofia Orr is, at the time this issue goes to print, serving a sentence in military prison for military refusal.

My name is Sofia Orr, and I refuse to enlist in the Israeli army because there are no winners in war. Only losers. Everyone living here is losing.

In Israel, on 7 October, all of us, especially the residents of the Gaza Envelope [the areas near the Gaza border], experienced unspeakable horrors that nothing can justify. Since then, tens of thousands of

people have been evacuated from their homes, soldiers are being sent into battle every day to die and be injured, hostages remain in brutal captivity in Gaza with no credible plan to bring them home, and Israeli society is falling deeper and deeper into messianic delusions, political suppression, and a thirst for revenge.

In Gaza, tens of thousands of Palestinians were killed, more than ten thousand of which are children, and additional tens of thousands wounded. Countless refugees live in tents, suffering from severe hunger and the spread of diseases, without electricity and basic hygiene, and all they can see on all sides are ruins. All this only leads to more hatred against Israel and increased support for Hamas.

Ordinary citizens on both sides are paying an unimaginable price in this war, and the situation is only getting worse. The present and future of Palestinian and Israeli citizens is inseparable. It is not "us" against "them", and it is not a situation where one side should, or can, defeat the other. Safety and security will only be attained when both sides live with dignity: either we will all lose in war, or will all win in peace.

Nearly all people living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea want to live a quiet life. The violent occupation policies, and now the war, prevent this for all of us, and push more and more people on both sides to the false belief that only violence can solve the conflict. The war only strengthens the extremists on both sides and their ideologies.

The powers that be tell us, like all the previous rounds of violence, that this we will "destroy" Hamas, that this time "deterrence" will work. Yet violent and extremist groups only grow stronger under extreme violence. It can be tempting to think that "after we destroy Hamas in the war, then we can achieve real peace and quiet here." But this is an illusion. It is a story that ignores the fact that Hamas is more than a violent group - it is the product of a violent and extreme mindset that grows and flourishes under conditions of oppression and extreme violence. Hamas could only grow stronger when every alternative, horizon, or hope has been denied for decades. It is precisely for this reason that Hamas has only become stronger since the beginning of the war, both in Gaza and the West

Bank. Even if the army could kill all the Hamas fighters and dismantle all the tunnels, without a horizon of hope, an even worse organisation would arise to fill its place, and the cycle of violence will continue.

The real enemy is not Hamas, but rather the extremist mindset it represents, and that is mirrored in Israel. Such thinking can only be dismantled through a political pursuit of peace and by proposing an alternative of hope to the Palestinians. As the much stronger side, Israel bear much of the responsibility for pursuing this alternative. It has the power to advance a political solution and dictate the tone, changing it to one that promotes peace instead of violence. The only path that can ever lead to a real solution to the conflict is a political one that includes fair Palestinian independence, and the granting of equal rights to all people from the river to the sea.

When I was 16, I visited the West Bank with my classmates on a school trip. We talked with settlers and Palestinian boys our age. When we spoke with the Palestinian youth, one of my classmates asked what was their dream in life. And one of them answered, "The only dream a person locked in a cage can have is to get out." That sentence has stayed with me and is now the reason I refuse to enlist: I will not take part in a system that is the problem, and not the solution. A system that damages security instead of maintaining it. I refuse to enlist in order to show that change is needed and that change is possible. I refuse to enlist for the security and safety of all of us in Israel-Palestine, and in the name of empathy that is not restricted by national identity.

I refuse to enlist because I want to create a reality in which all children between the river and the sea can dream without cages.

MESARVOT

Mesarvot is a network of anti-occupation activists supporting conscientious objectors. Mesarvot sees military refusal as a tool to help end the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people. The organisation was founded in 2015.

 [mesarvot](#)



ISRAEL/PALESTINE

IN DEFENCE OF STANDING TOGETHER

In the last issue of *Women's Fightback* we interviewed Rula Daood, National Co-Director of Standing Together, a grassroots movement uniting Jews and Palestinians within Israel to fight for peace and equality. Since then, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), a key organisation in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, has issued a statement calling for a boycott of Standing Together.

Ruth Cashman explains why Workers' Liberty does not support this boycott.

Since Israel's brutal invasion of Gaza, calls for international boycotts of various aspects of Israeli society have gained prominence. Workers' Liberty condemns and opposes Israel's invasion of Gaza, and its occupation of the Palestinian territories. We believe solidarity with the Palestinians should be the left's starting point on the question of Israel/

Palestine. We also believe that the proposal to boycott the entire nation of Israel is, at best, a distraction from more important solidarity work; and is, at worst, reactionary and counter to building an effective movement of solidarity with the Palestinians. Calls to boycott the Jewish-Arab movement Standing Together are an example of BDS at its worst.

Standing Together is a grassroots movement mobilising Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel in pursuit of peace, equality, and social and climate justice. They are the largest organisation in Israel calling for a ceasefire. They have offered direct protection and legal support to Palestinians in the West Bank facing racist violence and state repression during the war. PACBI has issued a call for a global boycott and no-platforming of Standing Together because their work "normalises" Israel. This means a boycott of one of the most prominent anti-war voices in Israeli society.



HOW ARE BOYCOTTS INTENDED TO WORK?

The Israeli economy is built to be resilient to boycotts. Some Israeli firms use third-country subsidiaries to bypass them. Because Israel was subject to a boycott by many Arab countries from its inception, much of its economy naturally developed in areas less sensitive to boycotts. Many Israeli exports are difficult to source elsewhere, mostly tech and intermediate goods not bought by final consumers. You can buy or not buy Sabra hummus, but your action will not exert any meaningful pressure on the Israeli economy. In contrast, the war itself has done huge economic damage. 18% of the Israeli workforce is currently not working due to being called up or evacuated. Palestinian workers have been shut out and denied permits to enter Israel. If Netanyahu was deciding whether to bomb Palestinian hospitals on a rational economic basis, he would not.

The boycott is less about directly exerting pressure on Israel and more about creating a political climate. By accusing anti-occupation Israelis of "normalising" Israel, BDS paints all of Israeli society as monolithically responsible for the oppression of Palestinians. In Israel, as in all states, there are people with different politics and interests. From school students being sent to prison for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories to far right ministers in government.

There is an Israeli working class, the majority of which is ethnically Jewish. Most workers support the war, but as socialists we think the right-wing politics of Israeli workers can be changed. Boycotts will weaken leftist, internationalist and pro-Palestinian forces inside Israel, and strengthen the right by making Israelis more isolated.

Nothing about Standing Together's activity "normalises" the Israeli occupation. Standing Together has mobilised thousands for demonstrations against the war; supported mobilisations against settler violence in the West Bank; and explicitly criticised the "genocidal rhetoric" of the war.

Another justification for the boycott is that Standing Together promotes "liberal Zionist arguments of dialogue and unethical coexistence". Standing Together calls for "co-resistance" against the Israeli government, anti-Palestinian racism, and occupation. One strand of that is to persuade working-class Israelis that they have more to gain by turning against their government and supporting equal rights and freedom for the Palestinians. This is the same argument socialist internationalists make to the working classes of any imperialist state.

Socialists oppose the oppression of the Palestinians by Israel both because we are against oppression in general, and because it undermines the development of the kind of politics we want to see in the Middle East and across the world – revolutionary politics, with workers of different national and religious groups uniting in the struggle against capitalism and oppression. Unless workers in the region fight for the right of everyone to freely determine their own future – a right the Palestinians are currently denied – they will never build a movement capable of overthrowing capitalism.

WHY ISRAEL?

Supporters of the boycott need to explain why they do not also advocate boycotting other states which commit human rights abuses, for instance Turkey for its treatment of the Kurds, Sri Lanka for its massacres of the Tamils, Russia for the invasion of Ukraine, or the US or Britain for their imperialist wars.

Clearly, refusing to engage in struggle because it seems inconsistent can just be a way of shirking responsibility. But in a world of nationalism and racism, inconsistency needs interrogating and

boycotts can shade into antisemitism.

Starbucks has been targeted on the basis that it "funds Israel" and specifically "donates its profits to the Israeli military". Its Jewish CEO, Howard Schultz, is a rightwinger but claims about Starbucks directly "funding" the Israeli military are simply not true.

At this year's conference of the National Union of Students, some delegates made speeches calling for the removal of the Union of Jewish Students from the conference. Graffiti in the venue daubed swastikas next to a condemnation of "zios." Removing the entire Jewish students' organisation is clearly antisemitic in logic.

The flat demand to remove "zionists" is a conflation of all Jewish people who feel some affinity with Israel, no matter how critical and how anti-occupation, into a monolith as if they are no different, and equally culpable, as the Likudniks, Ben-Gvirs and Smotriches prosecuting the war on Gaza.

SOLIDARITY NOT BOYCOTTS

When a peace group in Israel is accused of "normalising" Israel, we must ask: what is it that is not normal about the only Jewish majority state in the world? Sadly, Israel is not the only country to launch wars, to deny freedom to occupied nations, to have an extreme right-wing government and to have a population who place ethno-national identity at the heart of how they view themselves. Perhaps Standing Together is "normalising" Israel by breaking through the assumption that Jewish Israelis are a monolith who can never be won over to class politics or peace.

Progress is only possible on the basis of a framework that guarantees equal rights to both peoples, Israeli and Palestinian, including an equal right to national self-determination via two independent states. "Normal" Jewish and Arab workers uniting to demand freedom and equality for both peoples should have our solidarity. Any group or tactic that pushes against that is a dead end for solidarity with Palestinians.

-
- Standing Together
www.standing-together.org
 - UK Friends of Standing Together
www.ukfost.co.uk



• Forough Farrokhzad, poet.

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE IRANIAN WOMEN?

AZADEH NEMAN

For years within myself, I mourned, but today,
I ignite like a flame, to burn down your hay.
Either you craft silence to mask my restless roar,
Or I will teach you a different way, forevermore.
Forough Farrokhzad

From Tahereh Ghorratolein to Forough Farrokhzad, Persian culture is full of outspoken independent women, adept at defending their rights despite their silken dresses.

Therein lies the duality that many Iranian women face: a culture that celebrates their independence and a history rich with women on the frontline of revolutionary movements, confronting a reactionary government that begrudgingly allows

them a second-rate citizenship and an existence only as mothers of soldiers.

Ghorratolein was an educated woman, the brains behind the Babi (Babiyya) religious movement, and an advocate for women's right to education around 200 years ago. She paid with her life for her revolutionary spirit, becoming Iran's first "women's suffrage martyr". Despite being the first woman in the modern history of Iran to spearhead a movement for social change,

there is no academic research into her life. All that we have are anecdotes from Babiyya and Bahai minorities.

Farrokhzad is a different story: too unique to be forgotten and too involved with the 1979 revolution to be denied her place in Iran's history. Her poems – poignant, insightful, and anti-establishment – decry the misogyny which remains at the heart of the Islamic regime's philosophy. She remains a formidable role model for every activist woman in Iran.

The war against Iranian women has not been an easy one for the regime. How do you celebrate the revolution of 1979, where women stood on the frontline, while simultaneously ignoring those very women protesting against the reactionary regime only a few months later? How do you remember the sorrows of political prisoners without celebrating Farrokhzad's struggle for freedom? How do you deal with a problem like the Iranian women?

A DIFFERENT KIND OF FEMINISM

Understanding this duality in Iran's history and culture; the incomplete industrialisation of the country; and the consistent despotic nature of ruling groups, under whatever names and banners, is essential in understanding the women's movement in Iran.

Unlike Western feminism, which divided very early on into two separate branches – bourgeois and proletarian – Iran's incomplete class structure created the conditions for a different kind of feminist movement.

The Iranian woman knows that the struggle for her rights will inevitably be the struggle for the rights of all. The workers, ethnic minorities (Kurds, Turks, Lors, and Baloch), and religious and gender minorities. She knows, unlike a bourgeois feminist in the West, that women in high office can be a tool of repression. Her goal is not to elevate women to positions of power in a repressive government. She fights the root cause of the repression. In this sense, the feminist movement of Iran has evolved faithful to its socialist origins.

RESISTANCE ON MANY FRONTS

Iranian culture considers women mothers, wives, and daughters. So as mothers and wives they fight to free their children and husbands from the regime. As daughters, they fight for the rights of their imprisoned parents. They and their families are met with violence and persecution, as the

IRAN

wives of Pejman Fatehi, Mohsen Mazloom, Vafa Azarbar, and Mohammad Faramarzi (the latest Kurdish activists to be executed by the regime) experienced.

History also sees Iranian women as brave masters of war, leaders of armies, teachers, philosophers and organisers. So they fight at the front line. As trade unionists, lawyers and journalists they agitate, organise and fight for the rights of their class, for safe working conditions, a living wage, and freedom of thought and belief. As teachers, they struggle for the rights of their students to schools as safe places for learning and thriving, free from the presence of secret service employees.

The struggle long ago moved away from the streets and into the workers associations and trade unions. Today, together with their male counterparts, women are working to unite teachers and health workers. This is no small feat.

FIGHTING WITH OUR CLASS

The Iranian unions have always been local and industry-specific. This is not to underestimate their power. The oil refinery workers of Khouzestan hold the record for the biggest strike in the history of the Middle East. But a movement that fights for the rights of all needs a bigger reach, and a deeper connection to all Iranians. Teachers and healthcare workers are at the heart of the community in every city, town and village. If you unite them, you have an agitator in every corner of Iran.

What does all this mean for feminists in the UK? Firstly we need to learn from Iranian feminists and take our feminist movement back to its socialist origins. We fight with our class against all oppressors and work to unite the trade union movement. We need to be vigilant and ensure that the voices of the Iranian women are not lost in this struggle.

Secondly, we must be the voice of Iranian dissidents. Today there are thousands of children, teachers, and activists missing in Iran. They have been taken by the regime to secret locations, their fate unknown to their loved ones. Let us be their voice. Let us demand their immediate release, and an end to all executions and torture, so that women can build a better future for the people of Iran. Our demands are simple: equality, justice, and a country run by cooperatives and workers, not by corrupt and cruel politicians.

Woman, Life, Freedom.



• Tehran, 11 March 1979.

THE CASE OF SEPIDEH QOLIAN

On April 3 2024 Sepideh Qolian began a hunger strike at Evin prison. Her demand is to be transferred to Ahvaz prison, nearer to her hometown.

Qolian was first arrested for her support of a strike at Haft Tappeh sugar cane factory in 2018, and was sentenced to more than 19 years in prison, reduced to five years on appeal. She has reported being beaten, whipped, and threatened with sexual assault and murder.

Released in March 2023, Qolian was re-arrested the same day after she staged a protest outside Evin prison, head uncovered, shouting "Khamenei the Zahhak! We'll take you down into the grave." She also called for the release of political prisoners jailed during the uprising following the murder of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022.

In May last year, she was sentenced

to a further two years in prison for "insulting" Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. She subsequently received an additional sentence of one year and three months for "removing hijab, facilitating indecency, and persisting in committing criminal acts."

Human Rights Watch report that political prisoners get the worst treatment in Evin prison: "interacting with different authorities, and being pulled out for interrogations much more frequently. The authorities use threats of torture, threats of indefinite imprisonment and torture of family members, deception and humiliation, multiple daily interrogations lasting up to five or six hours, denial of medical care, and denial of family visits."

Pass our motion in support of Sepideh Qolian at your trade union branch:
bit.ly/free-sepideh-qolian



WAR IN SUDAN ONE YEAR ON

SUDAN

MAHITAB MAHGOUB

The Sudanese Civil War has passed the one-year mark, a tragic anniversary for millions of Sudanese people whose lives have been torn apart, quite literally overnight.

In the early hours of 15 April 2023, Sudan woke up to the sound of heavy artillery and the news that the top two junta leaders – General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereign Council and Commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemedti, Deputy Chairman of the Transitional Sovereign Council and leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – had declared war on each other.

Since then, the RSF has gained control of strategic locations in the capital, Khartoum, Gezira state, and large parts of Darfur, while SAF has maintained control of the rest of the country. Both sides have appalling human rights records and have been accused of deliberate attacks on civilians, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), to expand their territorial control. The RSF, infamous for its role in the Darfur genocide of 2003-5, has been widely criticized for mass looting and ethnically motivated massacres in the areas under its control. Similarly, SAF's air force has frequently conducted airstrikes on civilian areas.

The fighting has resulted in more than

14,500 deaths, with 10.7 million people displaced, 9 million of whom are displaced internally. This is the highest rate of internal displacement in the world. 18 million people face the threat of acute hunger in what the UN calls "one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent memory." Fighting has destroyed much of the country's infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, bridges, banks, and factories.

Multiple mediation efforts have failed to bring an end to the conflict or any tangible ceasefire. International diplomatic pressure has been underwhelming and has waned over time. The reported involvement of other countries, such as the UAE and Russia in support of RSF, and Egypt and Iran in support of SAF, threatens to further complicate the conflict, turning it into a proxy war. To make matters worse, the UN said in February that it had received only 3.5% of the \$2.7bn needed to respond to Sudan's humanitarian crisis.

Behind the grim statistics lie individual stories of devastating loss and unimaginable trauma. Unfortunately, as is often the case in conflicts, women suffer disproportionately. In addition to enduring systemic SGBV, which has been documented by numerous civil society organisations, they face precarious circumstances.

Women's experiences are shaped by their various intersectional identities and class position. Upper and upper-middle-class women have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and major cities such as Cairo, Kampala, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Riyadh, and Dubai, offering better living standards, healthcare, and education. Poor women, unable to afford expensive cross-border journeys, have become internally displaced, settling in relatively safer but impoverished regions. In their overcrowded Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) shelters, these women experience first-hand the impact of longstanding neoliberal policies that have stripped away public services and widened regional inequalities.

The rampant looting in RSF-controlled areas has also disproportionately affected women. Due to limited access to land and formal employment, many Sudanese women across classes rely on gold jewellery acquired through dowries or personal savings as their sole safety net. The looting of gold leaves these women without any fallback during the crisis and impoverishes them and their dependents.

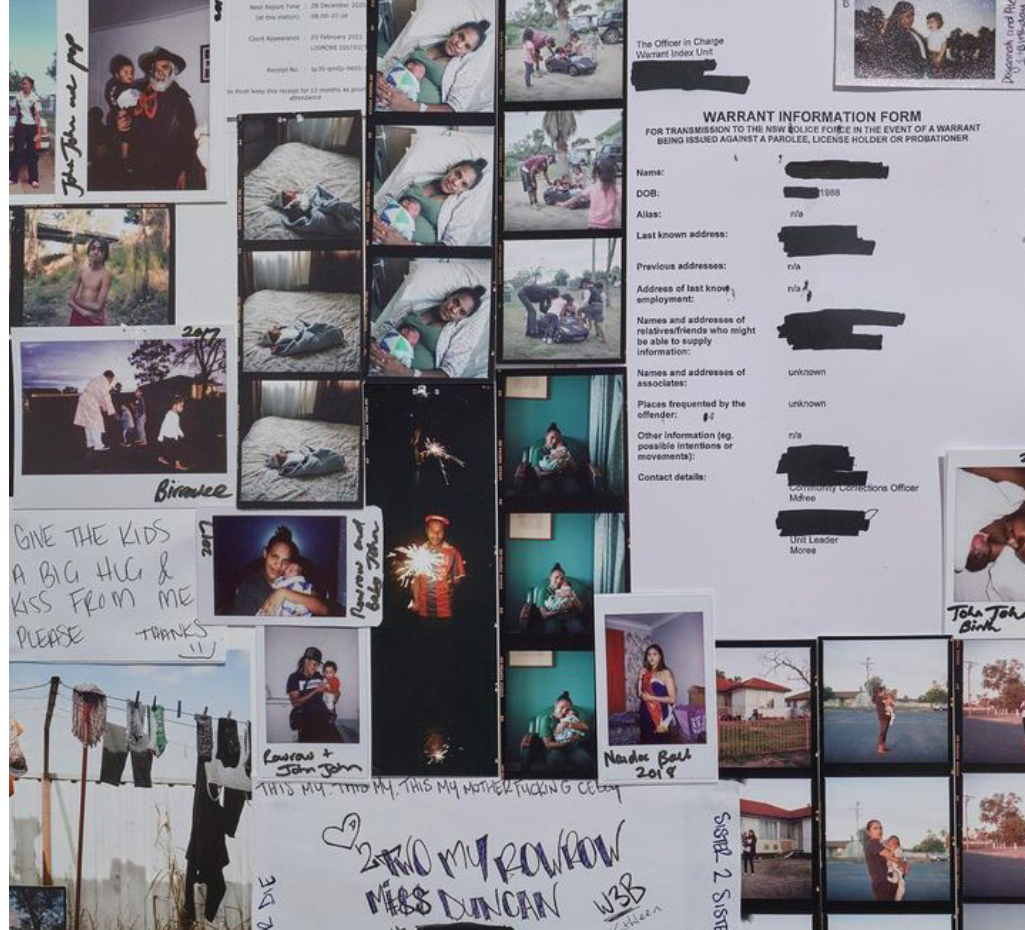
The war-induced economic downturn, skyrocketing inflation, and the devastation of schools and hospitals have forced women to devote many more hours to unpaid reproductive labour – subsistence farming, homeschooling, and caring for the sick and elderly. Those residing in relatively safer regions also shoulder the added responsibility of hosting and caring for displaced relatives.

Despite waning international attention, Sudanese women's steadfast resistance against the war persists both domestically and abroad. Particularly in safer regions, Sudanese women have been at the forefront of protests and demonstrations against the war from its onset. Despite the escalating crackdown, they have led various initiatives aimed at monitoring the conflict, documenting human rights violations, and mobilising resources for evacuations and IDP shelters.

Numerous feminist initiatives have directed their efforts toward offering humanitarian support. For instance, Ms. Awadia Koko, founder of the Women's Food and Tea Sellers Union, fled the conflict in Khartoum to Gezira and later to the Red Sea. There, she collaborates with other food and tea vendors to establish daily community kitchens for internally displaced persons (IDPs) across various shelters. The feminist and youth-led Peace Pad Initiative distributes sanitary pads to women in IDP shelters and refugee camps. Women in the diaspora have organised numerous international conferences aimed at securing funding for humanitarian aid, while deliberating on peace initiatives and strategies.

Sudanese feminists have taken a resolutely anti-war stance, diverging markedly from the general rhetoric that advocates for militarisation and taking sides. They have boldly championed the straightforward yet radical slogan "No to War" through statements and petitions that brought together women from diverse backgrounds and political views.

Despite their remarkable resilience, Sudanese women require global solidarity and concerted action. You can help raise awareness about the situation in Sudan, join one of the many protests for Sudan. Western governments must be pressured to allocate funds for humanitarian aid and exert diplomatic pressure on the conflicting parties to ensure safe humanitarian access and, as soon as possible, peace.



• Raphaella Rosella, *You'll Know It When You Feel It*, 2006–2023, .

ACTS OF RESISTANCE

REVIEW

JUSTINE CANADY

• *Acts of Resistance: Photography, Feminisms and the Art of Protest*
8 March – 9 July, South London Gallery.

It's hard not to feel a tinge of awe walking into the main room at South London Gallery (SLG). Placed in the Victorian building of the now defunct South London Working Men's College, it has high ceilings and cornicing that could make any visit worthwhile. *Acts of Resistance*, while benefiting from the feeling of grandeur the room brings, would have a lasting effect even if it was located in a pop-up exhibition in a shopping centre.

With the ongoing slaughter in Gaza and a global rollback of reproductive rights,

there has simultaneously been a push for more classic feminist activism – think "my body my choice" – and the appending of "a feminist issue" to wider causes. *Acts of Resistance* seamlessly ties together climate change, internationalism, and incarceration to feminism, while examining the more typical women's issues around reproductive rights and bodily autonomy.

The artists and participants in many of the pieces are unusual. Teresa Margolles exhibits a video of indigenous women in Mexico embroidering a piece of fabric stained with the blood of a woman who suffered a violent death, exploring how femicide at once rips women away from communities and brings them together.

A centrepiece of the gallery is Carmen Winant's photo exhibition of American Midwest women's clinics in the 1970s and 80s, depicting activism, daily activities and still lifes, as well as various editions of *Our Bodies Ourselves*. "The last safe abortion" is nostalgic for an era of feminism that feels more organised and cutting edge, that was seeing win after win, in contrast to the limited struggles of our time.

The most moving piece, for me, in Acts of Resistance stands away from the main gallery, across the road in the smaller SLG Fire Station Gallery. Sidled on the side of a fire station, this gallery is simple, with small rooms. Here sits Raphaella Rosella's "You Know it When You Feel It", a wall of pictures, letters, and various government documents relating to the artist's various loved ones in prison, particularly incarcerated women. The piece explores institutional failure, as Rosella says: "Rather than meet the immediate needs of our community such as providing access to safe and affordable housing, secure employment, quality education, accessible and holistic healthcare, and adequate welfare support, the state punishes us for engaging in underground economies to survive."

The imprisonment of women is particularly painful as it often means a family's main caregiver is ripped away. Viewers could spend hours hovering over the various pictures and documents, trying to piece together the story of women in prison and their families. On the wall, we see pictures and letters from one incarcerated woman, Tammara, who is pregnant. Photographs show her heavily pregnant in prison uniform; documents indicating care starting on her unborn child; her medical band at her correctional facility; and the pictures of her and her baby after she gives birth. Amongst this you can find neatly handwritten notes where Tammara critically queries a social worker's report or a handwritten letter from to children's services with concerns over the care of her baby over the course of a month. We can feel a mother desperately trying to exert love and control for a baby the state has torn away from her. Further into the cluttered wall, without much explanation, there is a picture of the funeral for Tammara. She was born in 1988 and died in 2020.

Rosella's piece ties together the contradictions of the family and the state and their role in care. They care and safeguard people, but can also be the cause of the most acute harm.



• *Lunch Break (Chão de Fábrica)*, dir. Nina Kopko, 2021.

WITH WOMEN, WE EXIST

REVIEW

Dailyn Williams reviews The Helena Solberg Cineclub's screening, *All Together Now: Sisterhood in Shorts*.

Brazilian filmmaker of the same name, has been bringing Brazilian filmmaking to central London since its establishment in 2012.

I was lucky enough to snag a ticket to *All Together Now* – a special collection of short films curated by Natalia Christofoletti Barrenha, all collaborations between Brazilian women filmmakers and artists. The collection highlights the themes of sisterhood: "...one of the key ingredients that has given women the strength to carry on over the centuries". The club itself, named after the influential

The first film of the collection, *Guaxuma*, directed by Nara Normande, uses multiple animation styles incorporating the flowing movements and sounds of sand and water to convey the story of two childhood friends growing up in the beach town of Guaxuma. The story reaches out and wraps around your emotions in various ways. Joyous memories wash over you with a nostalgic warmth just before the



tide turns and leaves you to reflect on loss and grief. It's a reflective film that starts the collection off with high expectations.

Any woman who watches *Passage of The Comet* (*A Passagem Do Cometa*) will immediately understand the subject of the film. Treading the line of a horror film, with its undisclosed location and nighttime eeriness (even including a shot reminiscent of the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*), the film encapsulates what it was like for a woman to receive an abortion in 1980s Brazil and relates it to present-day struggles. With more British women being tried for abortion crimes in the past eighteen months than during the entire period between 1976 and 2022, this film is more pertinent than ever.

Tropic of Capricorn (*Trópico de Capricórnio*) highlights the experience of queerness. Directed by Juliana Antunes, the film uses footage from her childhood to tell the story of coming to terms with her sexuality whilst growing up in Brazil. The film poignantly explores the contradiction between coping with a loss of potential and understanding how our homes shape us. Anyone who has flipped

back and forth from longing for "what if" and finding comfort in where they are now could see themselves in her experiences.

Lunch Break (*Chão de Fábrica*) showcases the potential of sisterhood, as we are immersed in a snapshot of the every day for women working on factory floors in 1970s Brazil. We are introduced to them at the beginning of their lunch break, held in the women's toilet. The film follows five complete strangers who, by the end, become as close to each other as we do to them.

With each of the five women given a spotlight during the film, all connected by a looming strike, we get to know them as they grapple with difficult moral dilemmas. Renata, a worker from a richer background than many of her colleagues puts it best: this battle is not between richer and poorer workers, but between workers and capital.

The film provides a sympathetic, humanising portrait of the women, and shows how intertwined the personal and the political are. While Joana refuses to participate in the strike, she is revealed to have been a committed striker previously, only now she has a sick child to care for. From suntanning with Coca Cola, to discussing the attractive voice of the radio announcer, and the revelation of queerness amongst them, the short film wastes no time bringing us close to these women, their lives and their struggle. Towards the end, we cycle through real-life photos from the time, and it is the female faces who stand out most proudly in the crowds of strikers, no longer forgotten and shoved away in stalls.

After our (lunch) break, the collection dives into another animated film: a film that conveys a deep message with a simple concept. *Ga vi: The voices of Clay* (*Ga vi: A voz do barro*) executes, in my view, the strongest strategy of the collection for exploring the idea of community. The film uses shots that repeat in order to remind us of the cyclical nature of generations. The most straightforward kind of community, the one we are born with, is perfectly encapsulated in this film with an angle that sets it apart from ancestry tests and family trees. Its focus on clay-making as a centre point connecting people and generations is as entertaining to watch as it is educational.

Ending with a film like *Frogs* (*Rã*) was a stellar choice by the curator of this collection. This film is utterly thrilling,

as the audience teeters on the edge of unease and waits for the 'other foot to drop'. As the tension reaches its height, a heartwarming neighbourhood feast brings relief. The suspicious packages, which our heroine has been hiding in her home, are full of frogs that are cooked up and eaten.

The quiet conflict of the film, driven by our female protagonist's struggles of raising kids and taking care of the house, is a private show for the audience. Only we get the version of her that exists in the world behind closed doors, whereas those in her life are only privy to the exterior she presents – a realistic parallel to the lives of women all over the world just trying to survive. The protagonist is all of us, struggling in stillness. Her ending, which strays away from genre expectations, is a credit to the film.

If you are able, seek out these films. But even more, seek out films from everywhere – from places you are not currently in. A trait of the film industry is its ability to bridge the gap between worlds. Here in London, you can travel into the lives of people in continents far away, and each time you gain something. Helena Solberg Cineclub middle-mans this process for you, providing free access to films from different times and places. It felt appropriate for the club to hold a screening themed around community; that's exactly how it feels to be a part of it.

• The Helena Solberg Cineclub:
bit.ly/helenasolberg-cineclub

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

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

🌐 workersliberty.org
✉ womensfightback@workersliberty.org
📷 [womens.fightback](https://www.instagram.com/womens.fightback)

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Join one of our socialist feminist book clubs – held monthly in London, Sheffield and online. All welcome!

BRIXTON, LONDON
Effra Social, SW2 1DF

• **Sunday 9 June, 2PM**
Who's Afraid of Gender? by Judith Butler.

We're having a month off in July for Ideas for Freedom. For more information see: bit.ly/ideasforfreedom

• **Sunday 2 August, 2PM**
Bodies Under Siege: How the Far-Right Attack of Reproductive Rights Went Global, by Sian Norris.

For a copy of the books or more info:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org

SHEFFIELD
Showroom Cafe, S1 2BX

• **Monday 3 June, 5.30PM.**
Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism, by Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright.

• **Monday 1 July, 5.30PM.**
Abolish the Family, by Sophie Lewis.

• **Monday 5 August, 5.30PM.**
TBC

For a copy of the book or more info:
sheffield@workersliberty.org

ONLINE

• **Sunday 9 June, 7PM**
Social Reproduction Theory and Disability, by Aaron Jaffe.

We're having a month off in July for Ideas for Freedom. For more information see: bit.ly/ideasforfreedom

• **Sunday 14 August, 7PM**
Who's Afraid of Gender? by Judith Butler.

For a copy of the essay/book or more info:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org