



WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

ISSUE 35 AUTUMN 2025 £3 A TRANS INCLUSIVE, SOCIALIST FEMINIST MAGAZINE BY WORKERS' LIBERTY

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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IN THIS ISSUE

This summer has seen the return of far-right marches through our streets and town centres. Under the false pretence of protecting women, far-right mobs have targeted hotels housing asylum seekers and mosques. Their racist nationalism is increasingly normalised by a Labour government that stretches further to the right to accommodate the demands of Reform.

In this issue, we expose where the roots of women's oppression really lie: the system of capitalism. We explore what we mean by class struggle feminism; cover the fight for bodily autonomy – from trans rights to abortion access at home, abroad and across time; the relationship between women and the far right, and how socialists, feminists and trade unionists are fighting back. We cover revolutionary art from poetry to surrealism, and discuss how the way we talk about films, wellness and health sometimes echo broader trends towards social conservatism. Read for this and much more.

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A HOT AUTUMN IN HE? STUDENTS AND WORKERS - UNITE AND FIGHT

STRIKES

Vicki Morris

The academic year is starting up. Many students will arrive at university this year to quickly find picket lines. Trade unions are fighting job cuts caused by the crisis in Higher Education (HE) funding. They are also gearing up to fight for higher pay.

• London, 6 Sept 2025.



HE workers have received the lowest pay 'rise' among public sector workers, just 1.4%, effectively a pay cut while inflation is running at 3.8%.

The five unions in HE negotiate jointly with an employers' association, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) which represents most of the UK's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). All five unions have rejected the 1.4% pay rise, and are moving towards balloting their members for strike action. They plan to strike together which could have a big impact.

All the unions agree that the UK's HE funding model needs to change, moving away from relying on student tuition fees to more direct government funding. The biggest unions, the University and College Union (UCU), which represents academic staff and higher grade administrative, professional and management (APM) staff, and Unison, which is the biggest union among all support staff, call for the end of tuition fees and a return to student grants to cover all the costs of going to university.

Our biggest resource to transform the world for the better is education! It should be freely available to everyone that can benefit, from early years extending to tertiary (university) education and beyond. Our universities should not be competing businesses; instead they should be part of a democratically accountable, national education service, publicly funded, with the funds to pay for it raised from taxation on the wealthy.

We need to build unity between the unions, not just sporadically through the official mechanisms but at all times and



in the workplaces. The joint strike by UCU and Unison at University of Nottingham on 22-24 September is a rare but uplifting example of what is needed across the country. And trade unions must unite with students to fight for our common interests.

Students increasingly are being deprived of the opportunity to study arts subjects, languages, and even pure sciences, as these courses, which are struggling to recruit in an educational marketplace geared to current employment demands, are the first that universities cut when they want to save money.

Students are struggling to make ends meet too, with many having to take on work that cuts against them focusing on their studies.

The Labour government is due to begin a review of HE funding this autumn. The unions, whether affiliated or non-affiliated, must put pressure on the Labour government to radically reform HE funding, not just tinker at the edges or, worse, put tuition fees up again to plug the gaps. Rightfully, linked to their pay campaign, the unions are talking about a political campaign.

It is possible we will have a 'hot autumn' in Higher Education, and it is long overdue!

NO COMPLACENCY ON ACCESS TO ABORTION

Ali Brown

On Tuesday 17 June, Parliament voted through an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill that, once law, ensures that people in England and Wales will no longer be open to prosecution for ending their own pregnancy.

This victory comes at a crucial time. Recent years have seen a 200% increase in criminal investigations and imprisonments for pregnancy loss, for both pregnant people and their partners. In the four-year period between 2020 and 2023, 11 cases concerning abortion reached a court, resulting in 5 convictions.

This reform is also significant in the current international context. While denial of abortion rights and access form a central part of the far right's global agenda, progress has been achieved in the UK. The most recent change followed the extension of abortion rights to Northern Ireland in 2019, continuation of permitting remote prescriptions for use at home for abortion up to 10 weeks in 2022, and the introduction of clinic buffer zones in 2023. This reflects the widespread support for the right to choose and access abortion. Research from 2022 found that 90% of UK adults think that women should have access to abortion services.

But this support shouldn't lead to complacency. While the recent amendment represents the most significant abortion reform since 1967, it is wrong to think this settles the issue of abortion – let alone broader reproductive rights in the UK. The anti-abortionists have not given up, and there is still much to fight for.

Abortion remains a criminal offence, with the 1967 Abortion Act granting exceptions to criminal prosecution in certain circumstances. The potential risk of prosecution remains for healthcare workers and for friends or partners assisting someone seeking abortion outside the confines of the '67 Act, leaving vulnerable abortion seekers more isolated

and at risk.

This legal status perpetuates fear and stigma. In England and Wales, 2.7% of women aged 20–29 years have an abortion each year, and one in three sexually active women in Britain have an abortion by the age of 45 years. Abortion is a common medical procedure, and its maintenance within criminal law is exceptional. Decriminalization can begin the normalisation and demystification of abortion.

The law continues to deny pregnant people the right to make their own choices regarding their bodies. The recent reform does not change the abortion time limit; nor the grounds on which abortions may be provided; nor the position of doctors as gatekeepers, through the requirement for two doctors' signatures. These provisions continue to restrict safety and access. The law should have no place in determining what should be a private decision, to be undertaken with sound medical advice. We need abortion access as early as possible, and as late as necessary. That means full decriminalisation.

Stella Creasy MP has correctly argued that timidity led to a missed opportunity for fundamental reform, after her additional amendment aiming for complete decriminalisation was not heard. "In the current parliament, any pro-choice amendment would have passed. A critical opportunity not just to stop the destructive prosecutions and investigations under outdated laws.... but to also protect access for the 250,000 who have an abortion every year, has been missed. As a result, the laws that make abortion a criminal act remain, ready to be exploited by those who wish to attack access should they come to power."

For many years the pro-choice political agenda has been set by a handful of centrist MPs and abortion provider charities. Despite paper support from many trade unions, a grassroots movement for abortion decriminalisation has been practically nonexistent. In the 1960s and 1970s, this wasn't the case:

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

abortion rights were won off the back of a powerful women's movement and a trade union movement rallying to the cause of reproductive justice. We need a revival of this movement if we are to see the necessary change to support bodily autonomy and measures to defend and extend abortion access. This means building active street-, community- and workplace-based campaigning to assert the need for full decriminalisation; it means a focus on access, not just the legal rights agenda; it means broadening our project to encompass wider areas of reproductive justice; and it means alliances with other forces countering the far right.

ACCESS

Remote access to abortion pills for use at home has greatly improved access, comfort and convenience, and has potentially driven the increase in the proportion of abortions occurring under 10 weeks. Taking both medications at home is the most common procedure, accounting for 61% of all abortions in 2022. Despite this and the legal gains made in recent years, access to UK abortion services remains patchy.

Following decriminalisation in Northern Ireland in October 2019, no services were commissioned, with the Northern Ireland Health Minister stating that the regulations "did not compel the NI Executive to provide abortion services." After further legislation and a legal battle, commissioning was eventually done by the UK Government in late 2023. This led to a rise of 28.8% from the previous year during 2023/24. But this represented only 2,792 abortions, including 198 surgical abortions, which may suggest ongoing difficulties.

Availability also differs within England, Wales and Scotland, particularly for abortions in the second semester. The Lancet reported that within the legal time period for a termination – 23 weeks and six days – many are still finding it difficult to access treatment because of a lack of specialist services across huge areas of the UK. Rural areas, where there tends to be lower availability of doctors, are worst hit. There are no Scottish Health Boards offering abortion up to the 24-week legal limit under grounds of risk to physical or mental health. Those needing this service have to travel to England, increasing their costs and inducing stress and stigmatisation.



• London, 6 September 2025. March for Life Counter Protest

Access difficulties are not experienced equally. Teenagers, for example, are one and a half times more likely to seek an abortion after thirteen weeks. The hostile environment deprives migrants of abortion services altogether. Increased costs are felt more by working-class people already struggling financially, and raising the funds for travel and accommodation can cause delays. Travelling for services means more time off work, the need for childcare, and compromises confidentiality and safety. Disadvantage and vulnerability are compounded.

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Over many decades, working class and Black feminists, particularly in the US, have emphasized the importance of standing for reproductive justice. Key advocate Dorothy Roberts has said, "The language of choice has proved useless for claiming public resources that most women need in order to maintain control over their bodies and their lives." Rights without access cannot bring reproductive freedom.

In addition, our campaigns must recognise the threats in and to services beyond abortion. For example, nearly half of women report barriers to accessing appropriate contraception.

An NHS in crisis has led to long wait times, difficulty securing appointments, and financial hurdles. Black women are still twice as likely as white women to die from pregnancy related causes, and 28% reported discrimination in maternity care. Reproductive choices for all requires contraceptive equity and comprehensive sex education, and beyond that a living wage, decent welfare benefits, a well-funded NHS accessible to all, and quality affordable childcare and housing. Broadening our campaigning to include these issues can forge solidarity. Immediately, demanding the government lift 350,000 kids out of poverty by scrapping the two-child benefit cap and taxing the wealthy should be on our agenda.

AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT

Building an active movement is vital as the hard and far right gain strength internationally. As documented by Sian Norris in 'Bodies Under Siege', anti-abortion networks have been at the heart of growing the far right's influence. US networks are building visibility in Britain. Between 2019 and 2023, the Alliance Defending Freedom increased its UK spending by 187% to more than £1.13m, and funding to the Good Counsel Network – an anti-abortion organisation purporting to give 'advice' to those seeking abortion

– rose by 30% to more than £500,000. Never missing an opportunity to sniff some cash, Tommy Robinson (Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) has increased his Christian nationalist rhetoric and accused MPs of "literally legalising murder" in response to the recent abortion reform.

Nigel Farage in turn has registered £25,000 in earnings from another US anti-abortion outfit, AZ Liberty Network, including £13,000 for speaking at a conference. Farage has repeatedly questioned abortion time limits. The danger of Reform in power is evident in the statement made to Politico by a spokesperson: "We're trying to cut immigration drastically. At the same time, to fix that population crisis, we're trying to encourage British people already here to have kids."

We have made incremental gains and we should celebrate the wins, but class struggle feminists need to build a movement capable of undermining the far right and achieving fundamental change. We need abortion as early as possible, and as late as necessary. That means full decriminalisation, guaranteed access and safety, and reproductive justice for all. It is up to all of us to fight for it.

CLASS STRUGGLE FEMINISM

EDITORIAL

Workers' Liberty, the organisation that produces 'Women's Fightback', call ourselves class struggle feminists and Marxists.

What do we mean?

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Capitalists' control over the economy and their relentless drive to increase their wealth causes poverty, unemployment, overwork, war, and famine. It is causing global climate catastrophe. To end all of this, the working class must unite in the workplace and wider society to struggle against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists.

This class struggle explains the dynamic of history. Class struggle is the nucleus of

Marxism in analysis and activity. Abolition of classes, the final end-product of class struggle, is the ultimate objective of the revolutionary process. The importance of the working class in capitalist society is that this is the only class whose own class interests require, and whose own conditions make possible, the abolition of class itself.

While we see class struggle as central to the fight for a better world, this does not mean that we can sideline fights around special oppression. On the contrary: fighting racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are vital to our class-struggle approach. The labour movement, the movement of the basic exploited class in capitalist society, has a duty of solidarity with the oppressed. And more than that: our job is to organise an integrated movement of solidarity with and between groups experiencing

special oppression, rejecting attempts to divide workers on the grounds of prejudice, fighting together to win all our battles. Only when every worker can take part in the class struggle will we have the numbers and strength to win.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

Capitalism is a dynamic system, which has created new forms of struggle and consciousness in which "normal" conditions of daily life can change. Women in the UK today have won enormous gains, we enjoy formal legal and political equality. There are laws against continuation issues like unequal pay, but many aspects of women's disadvantage continue.

Women remain considerably more likely than men to work part-time (41% versus 11%), or in relatively low-paid jobs, and to be paid less than men for equivalent work, despite longstanding equal-pay legislation. In 1987, just under half the population (48%) believed that a man's main job was to earn money, and a woman's job to look after the home, according to the British Social Attitudes survey. By 2022 that had fallen to 9%. But women still do more unpaid social reproduction – care, cooking and cleaning.

Sexual violence and harassment persist and continue to affect women's feelings of security and belonging in public space. In 1822, barrister John Frederick Archbold published Pleading and Evidence in Criminal Cases, which remains the leading practitioners' text for criminal lawyers in England and Wales. In it he stated that a husband "cannot be guilty of a rape upon his wife". This remained until a landmark court judgment in 1991. Still many women and girls live in homes where their right to personhood and bodily autonomy are violated by partners and relatives.

LABOUR MOVEMENT CAMPAIGNS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Much of women's current disadvantage stems from the way social reproduction is organised in capitalist society through the nuclear family and the gendered division of labour, with women carrying out the





majority of unpaid social reproduction – care and housework. Capitalist class relations, especially the drive for profit, will continue to push in the direction of privatising reproduction, lowering wages, and forcing the working-class family to bear the brunt. To overcome this will require political struggle.

Many aspects of women's oppression are workplace issues and therefore essential campaigns for the workers' movement. These include the fight against low pay, the fight for shorter working hours, and for adequate leave. There are also labour movement political campaigns around the welfare state and provision of services which would overwhelmingly benefit women.

Workplace victories would have positive knock-on effects for women's position outside the workplace, and likewise social wins would have knock-on effects on gender equality at work. Women's low pay makes them more dependent on male partners, less able to make choices about their relationships and domestic situations. Full-time working weeks are so long they do not account for caring responsibilities.

Higher pay, shorter hours for everyone, and more publicly provided care would improve all workers' lives, as well as equalising conditions between the genders.

We fight for the labour movement to take up broader issues of women's rights, for

example, abortion rights and women's health. Even those issues that are not strictly "class issues" impact working-class women differently. For example, the rich can access abortion more easily and more quickly within or beyond legal term limits; precarious workers are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault.

FIGHTING SEXISM IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE LEFT

The working class being uniquely placed to fight sexism does not mean that the working class or the class struggle left are islands of sanctuary from society's sexism. Too much of the left still argues that annoyances like sexism or racism will be sorted out "after the revolution", and that in the meantime we do class struggle instead.

Incidents of sexual harassment and assault in the workers' movement and on the left happen. An important part of the job of class struggle feminists is to fight sexism within our own movement and organisations to make them better places to be a woman and to make them better able to fight.

We need to be prepared to tackle sexism and gendered violence within our movement, including on the left. Though instances are experienced personally by victims, they often reflect broader cultural and structural problems. We argue for a political and organisational culture which makes people more confident to stand up

to unacceptable behaviour.

Trade unions are the central organisations of working-class struggle. They should be organisations for collective action, uniting workers democratically and encouraging them to see politics as their concern. But currently, they are too bureaucratic and sluggish, with powerful figures who wield too much influence. We need those in positions of power to be elected and accountable. Speaking up against abuses should be encouraged. Campaigns and struggles should be led by members in the workplace. Fighting for and achieving this will make our organisations more open, and safer for women; it will also make them more effective to undertake class struggle.

FIGHTING FOR CLASS POLITICS IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

All women are oppressed by sexism, but our feminism is not "bourgeois feminism". We are not fighting for a world where ruling-class women can exploit with equal might to ruling-class men, or for the equal exploitation of people of all genders.

We fight for an independent working-class political organisation, a social programme based on class interest. Does this mean we should keep away from the mainstream women's movement to avoid falling into the trap of bourgeois feminism? No, we fight within existing women's organisations and campaigns. Historically, Workers' Liberty has strived to work in the women's movement arguing within it for class struggle perspectives. Sadly, there is no mass women's movement today, Marxist or otherwise, but as a contribution to creating one we build campaigns such as those for abortion rights, trans rights, and against sexual harassment.

Working-class women of the world, unite! Class struggle feminism points us to organisation of the working class, and the self-organisation of women within it. Only the working class can liberate humanity, lay the basis for the liberation of women, and guarantee liberty to all of humanity.

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CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND THE FIGHT FOR ABORTION ACCESS IN ITALY

Monia (translated by **Nelsey**)

Some may take it for granted that, just because there are laws in place that protect people, our basic rights are generally safe across the board. But in 2025 we still find ourselves having to fight for the same hard-won rights that others, in other historical moments, once struggled so hard for.

Take abortion, for example. While it is legal in most – but not all – of the world, access is still heavily restricted. This is certainly the case in Italy.

Italy's Law 194 of 22 May 1978 states that abortion is guaranteed within 90 days of conception if it falls under certain circumstances relating to the pregnant person or the foetus. These factors could include social, economic or familial difficulties, risk to the pregnant person's mental and/or physical health, the circumstances of conception, or foetal anomalies or birth defects. Abortion may also take place after 90 days if the pregnancy poses a risk to life or mental health, or if the foetus has birth defects or anomalies. If an abortion is needed due to imminent danger to life, conscientious objectors – that is, healthcare providers who refuse to provide a requested treatment on moral grounds – cannot refuse and must perform the procedure despite their beliefs. Those seeking abortion after the term limit can face fines of 5000-10,000 euros, and those providing it can face imprisonment.

For comparison, in the UK abortion is legal up to 24 weeks if two healthcare providers deem there to be significant risk to the pregnant person's, or any existing children's, mental or physical health. After 24 weeks, it is legal for the prevention of grave physical or mental injury or risk to life, or if the foetus is substantially at risk

of being a "seriously handicapped" child. Similar to in Italy, the UK right to conscientious objection is overruled if abortion is necessary to save life or prevent grave injury. As of this year, seeking abortion past the term limit is decriminalised, but providing it remains a criminal offence.

In Italy in 2025, the law guarantees abortion access even in the case of conscientious objection. However, in reality the rate of conscientious objection is so high that those who want or need to end a pregnancy are routinely forced to travel to another region for it. Respect for others matters. But in this case, respect is only afforded to the personal beliefs of medical staff, while the pregnant person's body and circumstances are ignored. On top of this, a law proposed by Meloni's government and passed in April 2024 now gives anti-abortion groups access to abortion facilities.

In the region of Sicily, 81.5% of gynaecologists are conscientious objectors. In the Sicilian province of Messina, that figure reaches 100%. This year, because of the sheer number of objectors, the Sicilian regional government passed a law requiring public hospitals to hire only non-objecting staff.

Article 3 of Bill 738 requires all hospitals to establish dedicated areas for voluntary termination of pregnancy (IVG) where they do not already exist. When hiring new hospital staff, healthcare facilities will have to ensure that IVG units are staffed with qualified clinicians who are not conscientious objectors. Applications will be open only to non-objecting doctors, and if staff change their minds after being hired, hospitals will be obligated to replace them.

The new Sicilian law is certainly a step forward. However, since it was passed, it has been challenged and deemed "unconstitutional" by the Council of Ministers, Italy's principal executive body. The Council alleges that, by prohibiting conscientious objectors from participating in recruitment processes, the legislation violates the constitutional protection of citizens' moral, religious and ethical opinions. The matter will now be referred to the Constitutional Court, which will have to assess the balance between constitutional rights and the guarantees of public rights.

If the Constitutional Court decides that the Sicilian law is unconstitutional, it will be struck down. If they uphold it, the law can be fully implemented. Sicily's law matters not only for the difference that it will make in the region, but also for the ripple effect that it could have on other regions who could follow suit.

Still, as it currently stands, the right to access abortion is effectively still not guaranteed across Italy. This needs to change urgently. We know that backstreet abortions endanger lives, and any restriction on abortion access risks forcing people either into unsafe, non-sterile procedures or towards a life they never wanted. No individual's personal beliefs regarding abortion should restrict the freedom of choice of another.





TRANS RIGHTS

• London, 26 July 2025. Trans+ Pride - the largest trans pride event in the world

HOW THE EHRC IS FAILING TRANS PEOPLE

Cece Stranding

On 15th April, the Supreme Court announced their ruling on the definition of the protected characteristic of 'sex' in the Equality Act 2010, stating that it refers to the sex recorded on a person's original birth certificate, and not to their current gender or sex as recorded on any other official government document (e.g. passports or birth certificates amended by a Gender Recognition Certificate).

This ruling had several negative ramifications. The Supreme Court's ruling made repeated references to 'biological sex', a term coined by proponents of trans exclusion intended to undermine the sex of trans people. It equates 'biological sex' – a bimodal but not binary concept made up of each individual's variation across chromosomes, genitalia, sex characteristics, hormones and internal anatomy, as well as social categorisation – to mean the recorded sex of a person at birth. The Court legitimising this dog-whistle in its judgement is cause enough for concern for anyone aligned to trans inclusion, but this aspect of the ruling also potentially weakens everyone's protections against being discriminated against based on their gender. Most obviously, this applies to trans people who,

while still protected against discrimination on the basis of 'gender reassignment', are now only indirectly protected against sex-based discrimination. For example, a trans woman could still be protected from being discriminated against as a woman, but only because the protected characteristics in the Equality Act do not only apply to those who hold that characteristic, but also by those perceived to have that characteristic. Losing direct protection against sex-based discrimination creates a legal grey area, where trans people are now either protected or not protected from this discrimination based on how they are perceived.

In addition to this, if 'sex-based' discrimination does indeed only apply to the sex recorded on a person's birth certificate, then discrimination which targets (for example) both cis and trans women is no longer, by the Supreme Court's definition, 'sex-based' discrimination. The Supreme Court argued that its ruling was necessary to ensure protection against sex-based discrimination based on a person's recorded sex at birth, but sex-based discrimination is much more often based on a person's current sex or gender rather than what is on their birth certificate. At best, the Supreme Court's judgement

simply plugged one gap in the Equality Act by creating an even larger one.

Moreover, in the rare but important cases of administrative errors, such as when M is written on a girl's birth certificate by mistake, which cannot always be corrected, using such a narrow definition of 'sex' in the Equality Act also strips these individuals of protection against sex discrimination in the same way it does for trans people.

Somewhat contradictorily, one reason the Supreme Court gave for its ruling was that, in reference to treating trans people with a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) in accordance with their acquired gender, "it makes no sense for conduct under the EA 2010 in relation to sex-based rights and protections to be regulated on a practical day-to-day basis by reference to categories that can only be ascertained by knowledge of who possesses a (confidential) certificate". Yet, at the same time, its ruling has the effect of regulating protection against sex-based discrimination to a category that is, by definition, based on knowledge of a category on a person's birth certificate.

THE RESPONSE OF THE EHRC

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is responsible for encouraging equality and diversity, eliminating unlawful discrimination, and protecting and promoting the human rights of everyone in Britain. You might expect that, following the Supreme Court



• London, 26 July 2025. Unison Young Members at Trans+ Pride.

ruling, the EHRC would seek to urgently address some of the issues mentioned above. They might, for example, challenge the use of a dog-whistle like 'biological sex' by the Supreme Court, or recommend to the government that gender-based protections should be added to the Equality Act to address the gaps left by the Supreme Court's reduction of sex to what was recorded on a person's birth certificate. And indeed, the EHRC did react quickly to the ruling, releasing an 'interim update' on its interpretation of the judgement just 10 days after the judgement was made.

However, far from seeking to encourage equality and reduce discrimination, the EHRC's update instead recommended that trans people must be excluded from single-sex services and facilities that align with their current gender. Moreover, they urged service providers to ask their service users to produce their birth certificates in order to access 'single-sex' spaces – while offering no guidance on how this could be feasible without either everyone being expected to carry around their birth certificate, or service providers profiling service users in a way that conflicts with the Equality Act, especially since trans people can amend their birth certificates, and birth certificates themselves cannot be used to identify individuals.

The EHRC's interim guidance actually went even further, urging service providers to exclude trans people from some services (e.g. workplaces toilets) which are covered by separate pieces of legislation that were not impacted by the Supreme Court ruling. Again, the scope of the ruling was limited to the Equality Act, and did not alter the definition of 'sex' anywhere else in law. This response from the EHRC is unfortunately not surprising.

The EHRC were placed under special review by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) back in 2023, in part due to recommending that the Equality Act be revised in the way it now has been by the Supreme Court. Despite this, they have not made any meaningful attempt to address the failings within the institution which have led to it failing in its duties to eliminate discrimination, particularly – but not exclusively – against trans people.

HOW THE EHRC RESPONSE HAS BEEN RECEIVED

Since its publication, the EHRC's interim update has been condemned by a variety of organisations (including human rights organisations and trade union conferences) for being unworkable. The EHRC initially tried to run the consultation for only two weeks, and only after criticism from the Women and Equalities Committee, and significant public backlash, was this deadline extended to six weeks. The consultation received over 50,000 responses, the most responses ever received for an EHRC consultation.

Again, you might expect that a functioning Human Rights institution would take the strong response to its initial guidance as a sign to reflect on its approach and take time to consider how to change gears to best address people's concerns. Instead, the EHRC used AI to rush through an analysis of the consultation responses in just over two months.

At time of writing, the EHRC has sent its guidance to parliament, but has not made its new guidance publicly available. Furthermore, the EHRC has confirmed that it is not planning to publish the report on its public consultation until after its new Code of Practice has gone all the way through Parliament, and is a 'done

deal'. This means that not even MPs will have the opportunity to scrutinise how the EHRC has responded to the results of its consultation. At present, we do not know if the new guidance will address any of the issues of the interim update, but the EHRC's decision to keep both the public and MPs in the dark until after the guidance comes into effect does not paint a reassuring picture. And regardless of the contents of the new guidance, the EHRC's attempts to avoid public scrutiny bring it into disrepute.

This failure of the EHRC to defend the rights of trans people is not an isolated incident. The organisation has previously come under fire from Disabled People's organisations after disbanding its disability advisory committee, and from race equality organisations after its failure to hold the government to account following the Sewell Race Report.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

It is clear that the EHRC is not only failing in its responsibilities to protect and promote the rights of vulnerable communities and protect people from discrimination, but in this case is actively contributing to the erosion of the rights of trans people. Service providers should continue to fight against any EHRC guidance that fails to protect the rights and dignity of trans people. But beyond that, we should be looking at the EHRC more generally. How did an organisation set up to protect human rights instead become a driving force for stripping them away? And is there any way to transform the EHRC into an organisation capable of meeting its obligations to defend human rights, especially when Human Rights organisations, including the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention & Human Security, are calling for GANHRI to withdraw its accreditation entirely?

But, aside from the problems with the EHRC, we should not forget that the issues raised by the Supreme Court's ruling on the Equality Act could be easily addressed by an amendment to the Equality Act to enshrine people's lived sex or gender identity as a protected characteristic, a course of action that the current government has (unsurprisingly) failed to take. Organised pressure from trade unions, members of the Labour Party itself, and members of other parties to adopt a policy of campaigning for such an amendment could well force the government to change tack.

JEAN 'BINTA' BREEZE:

CLOSE TO THE HEART

POETRY

Janine Booth

Jamaican-British poet Jean 'Binta' Breeze was a key figure in raising black women's voices in a poetry scene where white men dominated.

In the 1980s, 'dub poetry' was an emerging movement that fused reggae rhythms with spoken word, and addressed political subjects. In Britain, it became popular among black activists and communities. It also gained a following among the overwhelmingly white 'ranting poetry' movement. It was a similar crossover in spoken word to the link-up in music between punk and reggae.

Jena 'Binta' Breeze became the first woman performing poet in the new dub poetry movement.

I was one of the very few women in the ranting poetry scene at the time, and the appearance of a woman – especially one as talented, articulate and entertaining as Jean – was wonderful.

JEAN IN JAMAICA

She was born Jean Lumsden to a mixed-race couple in Patty Hill, a village near Montego Bay in Jamaica. Her mother and grandmother read poetry to her, though her father's drunken violence overshadowed her childhood.

Jean married a Welsh teacher, Brian Breeze, whose name she later adapted to Breeze. She worked as both a teacher and an event planner for the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission.

Her marriage ended after four years, and she began studying at the Jamaican School of Drama. There, she met dub poets Michael Smith, Oku Onuora and Mutabaruka.

She went on to join the Rastafarian community for three and a half years, and became a member of the Sistren Theatre Collective, which explored the intersections of gender discrimination, racism and class. This was when she added the name "Binta", an African name meaning "close to the heart" (it has other meanings too).

In the mid-1980s, Breeze came to Britain, invited by Linton Kwesi Johnson to perform at the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books. She returned a few months later for teacher training, and stayed in London, teaching theatre studies.

THE PAGE AND THE STAGE

Jean 'Binta' Breeze's poetry was for the stage not just the page, and she was a powerful performer.

Her poems speak in the voices of women characters in different situations and contexts. 'Wife of Bath Speaking in Brixton Market' spoke in the voice of Chaucer's woman who has lost five husbands, and in another poem, an old woman reflects on her appreciation of life's 'Simple Things', as she 'rocked the rhythms in her chair // brushed a hand across her hair // miles of travel in her stare.'

Her second poetry book, 'Riddym Ravings and Other Poems', published in 1988, gained her a strong reputation, which enabled her to give up her job to write and perform full-time.

Jean had three poems – 'Moonwise', 'Rising' and 'Dreamer' – featured in 'Poems on the Underground', displayed on Tube trains.

Breeze also wrote scripts for plays and films, and released five albums in which she performed her poems to music. Her poem-set-to-music, 'Aid Travels With a Bomb', reached No. 2 in the New York reggae chart.

MADNESS

Breeze experienced persistent and serious mental ill-health. She had a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and heard voices.

On one occasion, she was forcibly detained by police in Brixton and sectioned, with her three young children left unattended. On other occasions, when she had breakdowns, she would voluntarily admit herself to hospital.

Jean wrote and spoke openly about her 'madness', but resisted simplistic views of



it as solely either a creative inspiration or a debilitating curse.

LEICESTER

Jean moved to Leicester and in 2011, the University of Leicester made her an honorary creative writing fellow (which was followed by an honorary doctor of letters degree in 2017).

She worked with several Leicester organisations, and ran mentoring for mid-career poets in the East Midlands. From 2013, she split her time between there and a home in Sandy Bay, near her birthplace in Jamaica.

LEGACY

In 2018, Breeze won a lifetime achievement award from the Jamaican Poetry festival and a silver Musgrave medal from the Institute of Jamaica.

In 2021, at the age of just 65, Jean 'Binta' Breeze died. Nine books of Breeze's poetry were published during her lifetime. The first, 'Answers', was published in Jamaica in 1983, with the remainder published in the UK. Her final book, *The Verandah Poems*, came out in 2016 to mark her 60th birthday.

She said she was influenced by "a strong, solid feminist movement coming from Britain right through the 90s", adding that "though I was in England, my writing was for the Caribbean and the third world".

Booker Prize winner Bernardine Evaristo described Breeze as having "a warmth, humour, and charisma in performance that stands unrivalled. Her poems are transformed by a delivery that is rhapsodic, incantatory, hypnotic and always entertaining." Michael Rosen said, "Her poetry and performance was an announcement about womanhood, ethnicity, colour, nationhood and in particular Jamaica."

MATERIALISTS - SEPARATING THE FEMINISTS FROM THE CLASSISTS

REVIEW

Francis Pope

This review contains spoilers

'Materialists', which came out in August, is the second film by acclaimed director Celine Song, known for the 2023 indie hit 'Past Lives'. Like Past Lives, 'Materialists' is a romance. The film follows Dakota Johnson's Lucy, who lives in New York and works as a matchmaker, catering to the incredibly picky desires of rich New Yorkers who ask for six feet tall men, women two decades younger than them, or in one extreme case 'no fats and no blacks'.

Lucy faces a romantic dilemma of her own when two men enter her life at the same time: Pedro Pascal's Harry, a rich, handsome banker and exactly the sort of man Lucy's clients long for, and Chris Evans' John, her ex-boyfriend, who's broke and a bit of a mess but has a charm of his own and who she clearly has a strong connection with. Eventually, Lucy rejects materialism in two senses in that she grows disillusioned with her job and chooses John over Harry, with the film ending on an upbeat note as her and John rekindle their relationship.

'Materialists' was not a perfect film. The use towards its middle of a character's sexual assault as a plot device to make Lucy disillusioned with her job was crude and, considering Lucy was clearly already on that path, rather unnecessary. Harry's confession towards the end of the film that he underwent Turkish height enhancement surgery is supposed to create an emotional, tender moment and give him some depth, but was simply comical and bizarre. One couldn't help but roll one's eyes when Lucy compared her job to mathematics for the umpteenth time (Namwali Serpell's 'New Yorker' article 'The New Literalism Plaguing

Today's Biggest Movies' is crucial reading to understand this infuriating phenomenon). And, ultimately, it felt a bit hollow to have a film all about rejecting shallow materialism in which all three main characters, and in fact every character, are very attractive. Plus, Celine Song should be put in jail for casting Dasha Nekrasova from the 'Red Scare' podcast in the year of our Lord 2025, but that's a whole different can of worms.

That all being said, I confess to really quite liking the film. It was both very funny and surprisingly moving, and the ending, with its rejection of shallowness and vanity, gave me an ounce of hope about the state of the world.

What is far more remarkable than the film itself, and is focused on in this review, is the vitriol that has been directed at it by young women purporting to be progressive and, in many cases, feminists, who have revealed themselves to be classists clad in pink. At the top of the film's reviews on 'Letterboxd' are two two-starrers decrying it as "broke man propaganda", because Lucy chooses the financially unsuccessful John. One needs only to click on the comments section of any social media post discussing the film to see people ('people' is used to be inclusive but it's mostly women making the point, although they are joined by some gay men) feverishly and doggedly making the same point.

To sum up their criticisms, these people are accusing the film and Celine Song of sexistly telling women to clip their own wings and settle for less, of unfairly focusing on men's issues at a time when women have it rough, and of making excuses for men who are broke because they're lazy. While these concerns are in some way understandable, altogether

• Celine Song, director of 'The Materialists'

they amount to a rather flippant and unfair dismissal of the film along pseudo-feminist lines. The charge that Song is focusing on the wrong things is especially irritating, as it is essentially tantamount to saying 'She should have made a completely different film about completely different things'. Yes, women face a litany of challenges, ranging from restrictions on abortion access to workplace discrimination, but that does not mean every piece of art ever should be about those things. What would be the fun in that?

To say that because women are in many instances suffering, a film that explores the challenges faced by men (and indeed, women) in the dating market is a grave offense and should not have been made is essentially a fascistic, dictatorial stance. The nastiest of the criticisms of the film is the charge that it is 'broke man propaganda'; this allegation is a tired bit of plain old classism disguised as feminism. There is something of a history of feminists being dismissive of men's economic woes – Dworkin writes in her otherwise excellent work *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* that "poor men use money to an astonishing degree for pleasure", echoing well-worn myths about the fecklessness of the working class one would expect to find in the pages of the 'Spectator'. Of course, Andrea Dworkin is wonderful and is Andrea Dworkin – she should not be expected to have any sympathy for men. But the people calling 'Materialists' "broke man propaganda" are not Andrea Dworkin (unless she has risen from the dead and set up thousands of sockpuppet accounts across





hating is a joyous activity – it is great fun to make jokes at the expense of men as a cohort, often made even more fun by the scolding 'And if the roles were reversed?' response. But that is not what these people are doing. Implicit in the hatred of John is the worship of Harry and his inherently masculine-coded financial job. The charge that the film is "broke man propaganda" is not rooted in misandry, which would at least be somewhat subversive, but rather in boring old classism. Despite the film's critics disguising their views as feminism, it is clear they have a bigger issue with the 'broke' part than with the 'man' part. In short, the film's critics serve up classism disguised as man hating disguised as feminism, seeking to give their deeply regressive take a progressive veneer.

'Materialists' is a humorous, enjoyable film that pokes fun at the superficiality and vanity that plagues not just the dating world but society as a whole, mocking the impossibly high expectations humans have not just of potential romantic partners but of our fellow citizens in general. In this sense, it is broke man propaganda, and broke woman propaganda, and ugly man propaganda, and ugly woman propaganda, all of which is sorely needed in today's society. It's been spoiled several times in this review but you should go and watch it anyway, if only to defeat the vicious insurgency being waged against it by the faux-feminist classists who think they're Dworkin, but really sound a lot like Thatcher.

SEX WORK

multiple social media platforms, in which case I eat my words) so they have not earned the right to an intellectually lazy dislike of poor men, and are wrong to use concern for women as a veneer to bash the working class.

With regards to the idea that the film tells women to lower their ambitions and expectations, this is true in the sense that the film tells everyone in the dating world to lower their expectations. As mentioned earlier, for every one of Lucy's female clients looking for a tall, handsome billionaire, there is a lecherous male one asking for a woman half his age. Song does not discriminate on the basis of sex in her critique of the dating market, telling everyone to chill the hell out with their pie in the sky fantasies and unachievable wishlists. It is understandable why women might be jumpy at the suggestion that they become less choosy when picking romantic partners, considering that the last decade has been plagued by online incels going 'Why won't these stupid feminist bitch slut harpies date a nice guy like me instead of a chad?'. But, it is absolutely possible, perhaps even crucial, to critically examine and discuss the various factors that underpin romantic and sexual attraction without descending into frenzied claims of a right to sex and government-assigned girlfriends for all. In 'Materialists', Song does this in an effective, interesting, and non-preachy manner, looking at the harm unrealistic expectations do to both men and women.

The most pathetic thing about 'Materialists' classist detractors is that they are not even real man-haters. Man

THE ONLINE SAFETY ACT

Annie Lawson-Foley

As anyone who has tried to view pornography online since 25th July will know, the Online Safety Act 2023's protection of children codes of practice have come into force. Social media platforms and other websites are now legally required to block children's access to harmful content, or face heavy fines (£18 million or 10% of global revenue, whichever is greater). The Act requires pornography sites to verify that users are 18 or over through a range of checks, such as photo-ID matching, facial age estimation, or bank card verification.

The Act, intended to make the internet a safer place for children, has drawn criticism from both sides of the political spectrum over its attempts to regulate speech.

Social media companies, and other websites, began overregulating in response to the Act. Content with potentially harmful (adult, gruesome, serious) themes have been hidden behind age verification. X (formerly Twitter) blocked users from viewing a video of MP Katie Lam's 'rape gang' speech in parliament, whilst Reddit now requires age verification for users to access r/IsraelExposed and forums dedicated to sexual health. Whether you agree with Reform's claim that the Act will make the UK a "borderline dystopian state" or not, verifying your age to use Spotify, just to prevent stumbling across an 18+ music video, does seem a little heavy handed.

Most public conversation about the Act is about its age-gating of pornography websites. Daily visits to 'Pornhub' - the UK's most used site - fell by 47% from 24 July to 8 August, with the next most popular sites experiencing similar drops. However, demand for VPNs (virtual private networks) has soared, with ProtonVPN reporting a 1400% increase in sign ups since 25th July.

Children should not be exposed to pornography. However, it's hard to regulate the internet where such content is increasingly found outside of dedicated sites. Research by the children's commissioner found that more children had seen pornography online by accident, compared to by deliberately seeking it out – 59% versus 35%. The proportion of accidental viewers has also increased by 21 percentage points since 2023.

The Act seeks to protect women and girls, who are disproportionately impacted by 'harmful material': pornography, and material that promotes suicide, self-harm or eating disorders (though how you legislate against centuries held, deeply entrenched body standards, I don't know.) Regarding all pornography as automatically harmful obscures its role as speech, sex education (for better or worse) and in shaping sexual desires, as explored by Amia Srinivasan in *The Right to Sex*.

Furthermore, we must ask; which women and girls does the Act want to protect?

PINK- PILLED: REFLECTIONS FROM SUMMER CAMP

Dominika Szarek

Can radicalisation begin with seemingly innocent content – like posts that randomly appear on our Instagram feeds? Can fitness and wellness culture act as a pipeline toward more extreme ideologies? This was a recurring theme in our discussion of *Pink-Pilled* by Lois Shearing during our Summer Camp. The section on anti-fatness and wellness resonated deeply with many participants—despite initially seeming less urgent than the book's critique of anti-trans attitudes among women. What I had wrongly dismissed as trivial turned out to be a powerful, overlooked catalyst for radicalisation.

One example that came up repeatedly was the experience of knowing girls who became obsessed with diet culture—fixated on keeping their weight within socially approved limits, and ensuring that their consumed food is free of plastic and preservatives. This pursuit is often entangled with the desire to attract a 'good man,' reinforcing gendered expectations and heteronormative ideals. The wellness and fitness industry is booming, and that's undeniable. Our discussion didn't suggest that all wellness influencers are aligned with right-wing or MAGA ideologies. But there is a significant subset who promote a 'clean living' lifestyle that veers into ideological territory – advocating for home-grown food, rejecting processed products, and even endorsing raw milk consumption. These messages, while framed as health-conscious, often carry undercurrents of purity politics, individualism, and distrust of institutions, more specifically science – all of which can serve as gateways to more radical beliefs.

Content that shapes our daily routines – fitness tips, wellness hacks, lifestyle advice – can be a subtle vehicle for far-



And in doing so, does it harm others? Who is deserving of protection and who of punishment?

Sex workers often rely on the internet not only for income—through online sex work, advertising, and client screening—but also for community-building, activism, and collective organising. As such, the Act poses a direct threat to their income and security. Sex Worker Organisations have been critical of the Act since its proposal. The Sex Workers' Union met with Ofcom in 2022 to raise their concerns, but they were not taken onboard.

The internet, like public spaces, is already a risky space for workers in a criminalised trade. Online platforms, which play a large role in sex work, are unaccountable, predatory private enterprises.

The Act makes sex workers more vulnerable still – to censorship, reduced traffic and deletion of profiles, all of which will increase reliance on street work. Feminist (read: 'porn for women') pornography producer and website Bellesa has disabled their free UK site, as "the current approach is flawed and inadvertently hinders content creators from sharing their adult content and freedom of artistic expression". The censorship of support spaces, like the Reddit sexual health forum, increases vulnerability too. As Stacey Clare, co-founder of the East London Stripper Collective, states; "peer networks are harm-reduction".

We need only to look to the US to see the damaging impact of supposedly well intentioned legislation on sex workers through over regulation and censorship. The 2018 FOSTA-SESTA laws (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act) led to a panicked mass deletion of sex worker accounts, pages and even private messages by social media platforms and other sites.

Research has repeatedly found that FOSTA-SESTA has caused more harm than good. Research by the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling found that the laws made individuals more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, exacerbated poverty and heightened exposure to violence.

We'll have to wait to see the longer term impact of the Online Safety Act, but so far it has had negative implications for sex workers. Sex workers already present a sanitised version of themselves online and most do not own the platforms they work from. What would improve the work and lives of sex workers is not a paternalistic legislative approach, but decriminalisation, unionisation, worker owned platforms and health and safety protections and services. When a capitalist, patriarchal state passes laws to protect women and girls, feminists must not take this at face value, but instead question which women and girls it seeks to protect, and why.

right ideology. By embedding its values into habitual practices, these views become normalized, almost invisible, until they feel like common sense rather than political positioning.

Take the promotion of thinness and 'health' as a moral imperative, especially for women. In far-right frameworks, women are often reduced to biological functions: bodies designed to produce healthy children and future citizens of the nation. Wellness culture, when weaponised, reinforces this narrative under the guise of self-improvement and discipline.

This kind of content isn't new. Since we were little girls flipping through 'Cosmopolitan', we've been exposed to headlines like 'How to Attract Him' or 'How to Get Clear Skin and a Great Body.' These messages have always been there, – subtly shaping our sense of worth and desirability.

What's changed is the scale and speed. Now, this messaging is more mainstream, more pervasive, and more instantly accessible. We no longer need to buy a magazine to be told what's wrong with us and how to fix it. With just a tap, young girls, still forming their identities, are bombarded with content like 'How to Exude Your Delicate Feminine Energy,'

often followed by diet plans and exercise routines.

It's not just about beauty anymore. It's about packaging femininity as a performance, a product, a lifestyle. And that's where the danger lies – when self-worth becomes synonymous with aesthetic discipline and ideological conformity to what the far-right wants us to become: a desirable body machine for the future greatness of their nation. Men, too, are increasingly exposed to this kind of content – messaging that tells them how to become more 'alpha,' more desirable, more masculine. In our discussion, several men noted that their algorithms had become saturated with advice on how to enhance their attractiveness. For some, this shift began after joining the gym. For others, they were randomly targeted by the content surrounding balding – framing hair loss as a crisis of masculinity, solvable only through cosmetic procedures abroad, like those offered in Turkey.

This relentless focus on appearance and desirability isn't just superficial – it's ideological. It feeds into red pill communities that promote violence, misogyny, and dehumanising language toward women. When outer beauty becomes the currency of worth, and that beauty is defined by ever-shifting

standards, the question arises: can anyone ever be enough?

For some men, the effort to 'fix' themselves – through gym routines, cosmetic procedures, or self-improvement hacks – still leaves them single, isolated, and angry. And when that transformation doesn't yield the promised reward, the blame is often redirected outward: toward women, toward feminism, toward liberation movements that challenge the very premise of this transactional model of desirability. The result? A dangerous narrative that paints feminism as the enemy – lazy, unhealthy, and responsible for male suffering. A narrative that can trigger the most violent and deadly outbursts.

On the other side of the coin are women who also subscribe to this model of thinking – those who conform to the ideal of 'soft' and 'feminine' energy. Their curated personas, often promoted through influencer culture, signal to male audiences that there are women willing to submit to these norms. It's a fantasy, one that promises comfort, control, and aesthetic harmony. And it's precisely this fantasy, this imagined utopia, that far-right and nationalist movements often invoke: a return to rigid gender roles, sanitised domesticity, and obedient femininity. It's all part of a system designed to keep

• Socialist Feminist Reading Group, Workers' Liberty Summer Camp 2025



us chasing, consuming, conforming – and to punish those who dare to question it.

Another part of our discussion that deeply resonated was contraception – particularly its intersection with the wellness industry. One of the ways women are increasingly radicalised is through conversations around reproductive autonomy. This radicalisation doesn't stem from conspiracy or irrationality, but from a legitimate mistrust of medical institutions that have long neglected women's health. The passive and active perpetuation of medical misogyny – through under-researched treatments, dismissive consultations, and gendered assumptions – has left many women feeling unheard and unprotected.

Hormonal contraception emerged as a particularly charged topic. Several women shared experiences of being placed on the pill at a young age, often with little to no discussion of side effects. And the list of side effects is long—so long, in fact, that the information leaflet could practically be used as a blanket. It's no wonder that alternatives like 'Natural Cycles' or 'Hormone-Free' methods are gaining traction. At surface level, they offer relief from the physical toll of hormonal contraception. But beneath that, they reflect a deeper frustration: the medical establishment has failed to prioritise women's quality of life, and has rarely

considered whether men should share the burden of contraception. However appealing this content may seem on the surface, it bears striking similarities to conservative and nationalist rhetoric – rhetoric that places women at the mercy of their biology, tying them intimately to childbearing as destiny rather than choice. The implicit message is clear: the option to say "I do not want to be pregnant" is erased, replaced by a moral imperative to reproduce.

That appeal to this type of content has its consequences. Recently, I came across an article detailing the rising popularity of 'restorative reproductive medicine' within the White House. For decades, this field was considered fringe - even among supposed allies in the Republican Party. Trump, for instance, built part of his platform on natalist ideals, combining the prohibition of reproductive choice with promises of free in vitro services for Americans.

Proponents of restorative reproductive medicine advocate for "natural" approaches to infertility, positioning IVF as a last resort rather than a default solution. Physicians in this field analyse patients' diets, exercise habits, and menstrual cycles, framing reproductive health as something to be 'restored' through lifestyle correction.

One of the key policy advocates behind this push is Emma Waters, a senior research associate at the Heritage Foundation. The topic gained traction among female audiences at the White House, particularly after the Senate Pro-Life Caucus and Values Action Team hosted events where women shared emotional testimonies about their struggles with infertility and the failures of modern medicine. One attendee reportedly said, "I think I have endometriosis."

Endometriosis is among the most underdiagnosed conditions globally, with an average diagnostic delay of 6.6 to 9 years. Patients are routinely dismissed, and many healthcare providers lack even basic knowledge of the condition. Like so many issues affecting women's health, it remains under-researched, underfunded, and poorly treated - even after diagnosis. The result? The Department of Health and Human Services has committed to integrating restorative reproductive medicine into government-funded health clinics for low-income women.

Many of us left that conversation with the same sobering conclusion: women, like men, are vulnerable to radicalisation. At the heart of this is a deeper truth: there is always a 'why' behind the 'what', and that 'why' is capitalism – a system that has failed us in countless ways, and now offers us its rotten fruit. The rise of conservative and far-right ideologies is no longer confined to the algorithmic margins of social media. It has breached the gates of power, shaping policies that will constrain our futures and redefine our freedoms, and in the end made us all question what we consume online. After all it's the attention that brings the far right closer to power.

Capitalism, with its liberal feminist veneer, sold us the fantasy of 'having it all' – the myth of the girlboss who could climb the corporate ladder while juggling domestic labour and reproductive expectations. But this fantasy was never built for us. It masked the brutal realities of gendered economic inequality, medical misogyny, and the persistent refusal of men to share domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Under this system, consumption has been mistaken for liberation. We were told that buying more, achieving more, and leaning in harder would set us free. But true liberation demands something deeper: community, care, and structural change. And perhaps our collective failure to confront this head-on is now costing us dearly.

• A protestor at the the Bell Hotel, Epping



REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS THROUGH CLASS AND RACE: MARGARET SANGER AND MARIE STOPES

Dominika Szarek

During the second wave of feminism, many white feminists championed reproductive rights, but they often failed to address the painful history and trauma experienced by Black women due to medical experimentation and forced sterilisation – practices that persisted well into the 20th century in the United States.

While contraception can be celebrated as a milestone in women's liberation, its history is also deeply entwined with misogyny – a term that describes the unique forms of discrimination faced by Black women. Scholars like Angela Davis have shed light on how Black women's experiences with contraception have been vastly different from those of white, predominantly middle- and upper-class women. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis documents the brutal history of forced sterilisations endured by Black women and recounts how, during slavery, enslaved Black women were subjected to sexual violence and, in some cases, induced their own abortions to prevent their children from being born into inhumane conditions. Davis underlines that while reproductive freedom has

been a critical issue, Black women's experiences with contraception and reproductive control have been far more complex and fraught with coercion and violence.

In this article I want to shed light on two figures who are considered today to be key activists for reproductive health and freedom: Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes. Their contributions to reproductive freedoms were significant, yet their advocacy was often entangled with troubling eugenics-driven ideas about who "deserved" to reproduce.

Sanger was an American-based activist, while Stopes was based in Britain. Both women came from privileged middle-class families, and their activism was shaped by the 19th-century Victorian sensibilities. Whether consciously or not, they perceived the working class as innately depraved, enslaved to their animalistic instincts.

MARGARET SANGER

Margaret Sanger was a key figure in supporting the Enovid trials in Puerto Rico—an initiative that led to one of the most transformative developments in modern history: the birth control pill. Its introduction not only revolutionised reproductive autonomy for women, but also reshaped social and sexual dynamics on a global scale.

The Pill became a cornerstone of women's liberation, granting many the ability to make informed decisions about whether and when to have children. This control over reproduction opened doors to education, career advancement, and personal freedom—allowing women to engage in sexual relationships without the looming fear of unwanted pregnancy.

Alongside Katherine McCormick, who funded this significant research project, Sanger, a public health nurse, became a social activist advocating for better sex education and contraception. Her shift towards activism was driven by witnessing women resorting to illegal and dangerous methods to perform abortions. Many of her patients were



immigrant women from Jewish and Italian communities, who often endured the so-called '£5 abortion' procedure. Those unable to afford it faced severe health risks, a situation Sanger knew well, having grown up with 11 siblings and seen her mother gravely ill due to multiple pregnancies.

Sanger's activism in New York challenged the Comstock Law of 1873, which prohibited the publication and distribution of information on birth control, reproduction, and health, deeming it obscene. Initially a socialist, Sanger published 'What Every Girl Should Know' in 'The Call', a socialist monthly discussing puberty. However, she grew disillusioned with socialism, feeling it didn't fully support bodily autonomy. Abandoning socialism, she spent the rest of her life advocating for reforming capitalism with a strong welfare state.

In 1914, she boldly published 'The Woman



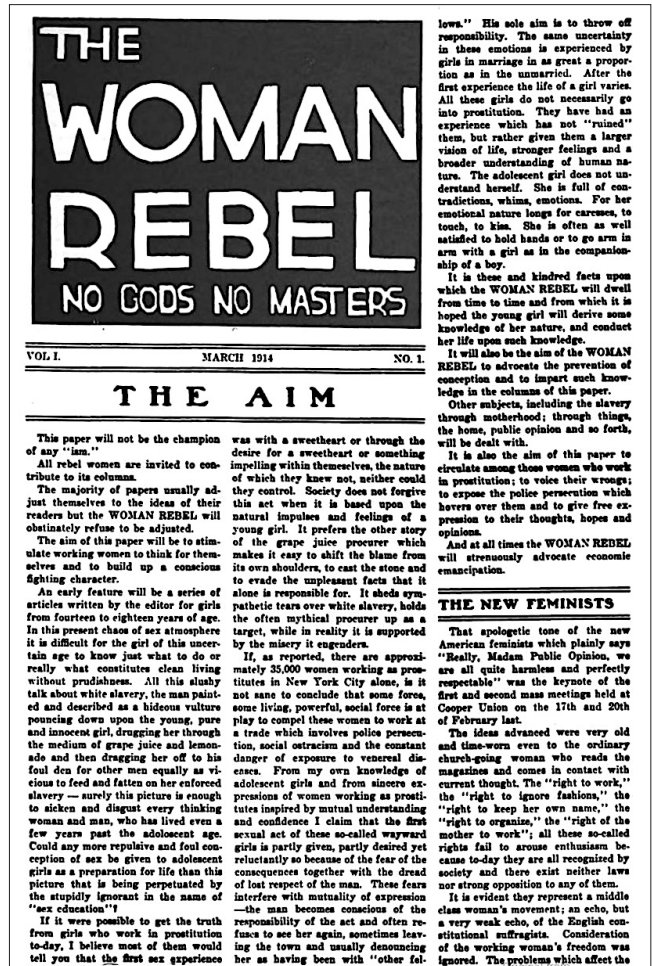
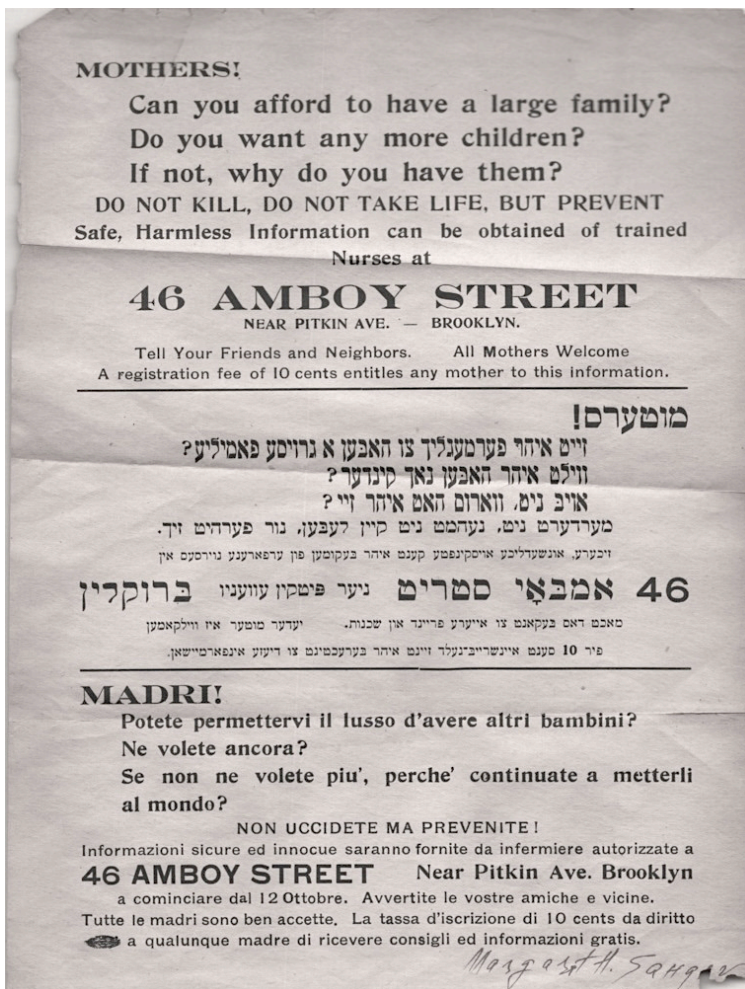
• Marie Stopes

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• Sanger's first flyer promoting birth control, and the first issue of her newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*

Rebel', her own paper that defied the Comstock laws, almost calling women, particularly working-class women, to arms against the 'slavery of motherhood.' This act led to criminal charges, but it didn't deter her.

Sanger continued to spread education on birth control, eventually publishing a book titled *Family Limitation*, which included illustrations demonstrating common birth control methods. The book became immensely popular, translated into 13 languages, and sold 10 million copies, becoming a cornerstone of the early birth control movement.

Unfortunately, her work was not appreciated by authorities adhering to the puritanical Comstock laws, leading Sanger to seek refuge in England to escape charges. Eventually, Sanger returned to the USA and opened a birth control clinic in Brooklyn on October 16, 1916, which evolved into what is now known as 'Planned Parenthood'.

There is no doubt that Sanger sympathised with the eugenics movement, which in the early 20th century was considered a legitimate science for improving society through careful

breeding to control population and reduce undesirable genetic attributes such as hereditary diseases. This viewpoint propagated ableist notions, with Sanger herself stating she wanted to reduce the number of children born with 'feeble minds and bodies.' This movement and its 'ideals' were further deployed by others to perpetuate racist notions of white supremacy, which Sanger herself deplored, yet she still saw birth control as a 'civilising force'.

What puzzles me about Sanger is her initial socialism and modest background. Yet, by 1920, she attributed working-class poverty to their own actions, engaging in victim-blaming. She suggested that unemployment, strike-breakers, and police violence against strikers were the faults of the working class and their inability to control reproduction.

MARIE STOPES

Britain had its own controversial figure in Marie Stopes, a contemporary of Margaret Sanger, whom she befriended during Sanger's exile in England. In Britain, ideas of eugenics, class hierarchy, and racial superiority were deeply entrenched in public discourse, and Stopes was no exception. She was an active member

of the Eugenics Education Society and a staunch Darwinist. Like Sanger, Stopes championed birth control, establishing the Mothers' Clinic in Holloway, London. The clinic, staffed by midwives and visiting doctors, provided birth control advice and contraception, including Stopes' patented diaphragm.

Stopes is often hailed as a pioneer of sex positivity. Drawing from her personal experience of an unconsummated marriage, which led to an annulment, she published *Married Love* in 1918. The book sought to educate women—primarily from the middle and upper classes—on how to have fulfilling and healthy sex lives within marriage. At the time, this was revolutionary, challenging restrictive Victorian ideals of femininity and advocating for women's sexual pleasure. Stopes even addressed foreplay, criticising Victorian values for fostering frigidity in women, which she believed drove men to seek sex from impoverished prostitutes.

Stopes and Sanger alike condemned prostitution, viewing it as both a symptom of poverty and a moral failing. Stopes further argued that healthy marital sex could prevent men from contracting



• Stopes' Mothers Clinic.

sexually transmitted infections and bringing them home, thus protecting their families and ensuring that bourgeois children were not born into sickness.

Stopes could arguably be considered a precursor to today's sex positivity movement. However, her contributions are deeply tainted by classist and racist frameworks. Her advocacy for sexual health and relationships was tailored to the sensibilities of the middle and upper classes, whom she regarded as spiritually and physically superior. Stopes, like many of her contemporaries, viewed the bodies of working-class women as less valuable, reflecting the pervasive elitism of her time.

While *Married Love* did not explicitly reference eugenics, by the time of her subsequent book, *Radiant Motherhood*, in 1920, Stopes had openly embraced it. Eugenics gained prominence in scientific circles after World War One, and while Sanger primarily focused on reducing hereditary diseases, Stopes was more explicit in linking eugenics to her classist and racist ideals. Her contraceptive diaphragm, for example, was pointedly named the "Pro-Race Cap".

In contrast, Sanger collaborated with civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois to open a clinic in Harlem. Du Bois believed that access to contraception would empower Black women, improving their economic opportunities and fostering "Black excellence". However, Sanger's language in the "Birth Control Review" often perpetuated harmful narratives, framing high fertility rates among Black women as a cause of poverty, rather than a result of systemic inequities.

By the 1930s, Sanger advocated before Congress for immigration restrictions to prevent the so-called "feeble-minded" from spreading hereditary diseases. She also recommended sterilization and segregation as measures to protect the nation's integrity. While Sanger distanced herself from the Nazi regime and its eugenic policies, Stopes fully embraced them, attending a Nazi Population Science Congress in 1935 and openly supporting their ideology.

REFLECTING ON SANGER AND STOPES TODAY

While Stopes and Sanger were key drivers in the bodily autonomy and reproductive health movement, advocating for sex positivity and enjoyable experiences for women, their work was divisive, set within class and race lines. Both women promoted legislation to prevent the 'unfit' from reproducing without challenging the system at its core. They were white

and privileged, using state powers to challenge the traditional while maintaining a reformist rather than revolutionary approach.

They viewed immigrant, ethnic, and working-class women from patronising, racist, and classist angles. Stopes, more than Sanger, held these views due to Britain's imperial pride, while Sanger's initial flirtation with socialism may have tempered her more extreme views. However, her views that were both ableist and racist came to even greater scrutiny in 2020, with her name eventually being removed from a Manhattan health clinic because of her "harmful connections to the eugenics movement".

Neither Margaret Sanger nor Marie Stopes supported abortion; their advocacy leaned more toward moderate reproductive control than full liberation. Both promoted selective breeding as a means to 'enhance' the nation, and their work was deeply rooted in eugenic ideologies—a legacy that cannot be overlooked. As Elinor Cleghorn insightfully noted in her interview with 'Women's Fightback' (Issue 30), while these women contributed to foundational understandings of bodily autonomy, their legacies underscore the need to move beyond individual accomplishments. The reproductive justice movement must expand past the narrow confines of white, upper- and middle-class perspectives. It must also confront the capitalist logic that determines who is deemed "fit" to have families—a system that frames deprivation as a moral failing of the working class, and punishes them accordingly.

• Marie Stopes in her laboratory





MASSIVE FAR RIGHT MOBILISATION: SOUND THE ALARM

THE FAR RIGHT

Dan Katz

The unions and Labour Party branches must put their members onto the streets under their own banners.

As I passed through Waterloo train station on London's South Bank at mid-morning on Saturday 13 September, a group of women were dancing and singing "Keir Starmer is a wanker" and filming themselves, howling with laughter. Hundreds of people were flooding off trains wearing patriotic t-shirts and carrying Union Flags and cans of beer.

At Waterloo roundabout several thousand had already assembled.

Police estimated the eventual numbers at the 'Unite the Kingdom' march, billed

as a protest for free speech, and which converged on Parliament Square, at 110,000. Certainly it was enormous. And it included many working-class men who know how to fight.

But because the march was so large many of the participants were women, some had brought their children.

The anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant right was in a party mood; they feel themselves to be in the ascendancy. And they're right. The far-right street movement led by the grifter and hooligan Tommy Robinson is building, flanking the ascendancy of Nigel Farage's Reform party.

By noon 300,000 were watching a live-stream of the protest on Robinson's X account.

The right has gained from Trump's second victory in the US and the political aftermath of the 2008 crash and Brexit in the UK. And another element is the policy and crassness of the Labour government, which has passed on cuts to working class people, solved none of the social problems workers and the poor face, and has chimed in with the far-right's anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Keir Starmer spent the afternoon watching football at Arsenal's ground, smug and complacent. Labour members and the union affiliates must force this government to act for workers, not the rich and end the attacks on refugee and migrant worker rights.

Elon Musk spoke to the racists' rally through a video link. He called for the "dissolution of parliament" and a change of government in the UK. He added, "Whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming at you. You either fight back or you die."

By comparison the SWP-front Stand Up To Racism's counter-demonstration mustered far-less than 10,000. SUTR is union-funded and unions sponsored the counter-demo but failed to show up with their members. They leave 'fighting fascism' to the SWP and that is becoming a serious, dangerous mistake.

The SWP-SUTR policy is bland, lowest-



common-denominator, 'don't be nasty' anti racism, addressing none of the felt concerns of all workers across the UK. In contrast Workers' Liberty advocates working class mobilisation, black and white workers unity and socialist policies to defeat the racists.

The SWP had also failed to steward the anti-racist march, which was spectacularly stupid and casual with the safety of the anti-racist protesters. As the SUTR demo approached Trafalgar Square from the Strand hundreds of far-right marchers, many drunk and some coked up, stood on the facing pavement throwing abuse at us.

A well-organised protest would have seen stewards stand between the far right and the main body of the march and organise self-defence. A small number of police attempted to separate the contending protesters before the rump of the SUTR march was surrounded by police for its own protection.

In the ginnels and side streets leading to Whitehall from the Thames right-wing activists fought the police, firing flares and throwing bottles. Frankly, if the police had not been present the anti-racists would have been bloodily routed. Presumably now we will see an increase in racist attacks and attacks on left-wing events. We – the left, labour movement and minority communities – must be prepared to defend ourselves.

OUR PERSPECTIVE ON STAND UP TO RACISM: MOBILISE THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT

Stand Up to Racism, a front organisation of the Socialist Workers Party, have run much of the labour movement's anti-racist and anti-fascist work for the last decade, with trade unions donating vast sums of money to farm out this work to a third party.

Their model of organising tends towards set piece demonstrations, hidden behind police cordons; often small, passive, badly or maliciously stewarded, designed as photo-ops rather than real attempts to confront far-right protests. This method of organising is not up to the task of defeating the largest far-right surge in the UK since World War Two

Workers' Liberty believes that the labour movement and working class are the key to defeating the far right. Every victory for our movement is a bulwark against theirs. But we can only do this if we organise under our own banner.

The labour movement must step up its campaign against government cuts and defend migrant workers; the alternative will be a hard right government and the growth and realignment of the entire far-right spectrum in the UK. Unions must actively educate people against Reform in workplaces and communities with the goal of restoring the idea that

politics is not about division and hate, or pandering to billionaires, but building a society of equality and justice.

Labour movement organisations must urgently put resources (organising time, literature, social media) into and mobilise our members to convince working-class people of our alternative of equality and justice: free education for all, guaranteed jobs for all workers on union negotiated pay rates; taxing the rich to rebuild our public services.

This work is too urgent and too expansive to be left to a campaign groups such as Stand Up to Racism, it is work for the trade union movement as a whole; relying on SUTR without making efforts to self-mobilise is dangerously weakening our response.

We do not trust the police to protect our counter-demonstrations or our communities from attacks by the far right; it is necessary for anti-fascists to be prepared to physically confront the fascist far right. Organise labour movement self-defence.

Pass our Motion in your union branch:
bit.ly/far-right-motion

In particular the unions must take responsibility for campaigning and confronting the new racist right-wing movement. SUTR is clearly far out of its depth, unable to mobilise the union and Labour Party's memberships.

the far-right. If a Reform or Reform-Tory government follows Starmer it will be a disaster for the labour movement. Act now in your union and Labour Party to force a change of direction. Fight for socialist policies and workers' action against the far-right threat!

The unions must heed the threat from



THE MYTH OF THE BLACK RAPIST REVISITED:

THE GROTESQUE REALITY OF THE UK RACE RIOTS AND THE REASSERTION OF A MONOPOLY ON GENDERED VIOLENCE

Dominika Szarek

Far-right protests have surged across the UK in recent months, often targeting hotels housing refugees. On 17 July in Epping, Essex, demonstrators assembled outside a hotel following the arrest of an asylum seeker accused of sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl. The protest sparked similar actions in other towns, including London and Manchester. In Altrincham, activists targeted the Cresta Court Hotel, while in London, crowds gathered outside the Britannia Hotel after Reform MP Lee Anderson claimed that refugees from Epping would be relocated there.

On 2 August, Britain First organised a far-right march through Manchester city centre, drawing an estimated 1,500 people waving England and Union flags. Marchers moved from Manchester Piccadilly Station to Central Library, invoking images of patriotism twisted into racist spectacle.

The riots initiated by the far right in the name of the protection of women from sexual violence at the hands of animalistic urges that men of colour exhibit, has also occurred this year in Northern Ireland on 9 June 2025 in the town of Ballymena, where two Roma teenagers were arrested on suspicion of sexually assaulting a teenage girl. The riots followed a similar pattern of attacking and setting fire to, such as the leisure centre in Larne that served as a shelter for immigrant families.

These protests come almost a year after the racist riots triggered by a mass

stabbing on 29 July 2024 at a Taylor Swift-themed yoga and dance workshop. That tragedy provoked widespread anti-immigration protests, civil disobedience, and nationwide riots – marking a chilling eruption of racism. The aftermath left deep scars and revealed the simmering xenophobia that too many Britons refuse to confront.

Hypocrisy will be a central theme in this article, but what also demands attention is the grotesque performance of hypermasculinity. Rioters not only targeted mosques and refugee housing – such as the attempted arson at a hotel in Rotherham – they did so in the name of 'protection'. This violent masculinity exposed the hollowness of Britain's self-image as a multicultural sanctuary. What unfolded was not protection but performative domination, a weaponised narrative to assert control over gendered and racialised others.

At the heart of these protests lies a toxic co-optation of the language of care: the far-right invocation of "protecting women" to justify racism, exclusion, and violence. In the face of blatant racism increasingly normalized in public discourse, it is imperative to revisit the enduring myth of the Black Rapist – a racist construct that fuelled decades of extrajudicial lynching in the United States. Shockingly, this practice was not formally recognised as a federal crime until 2022, when President Joe Biden signed the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act into law.

Angela Davis's seminal essay, 'Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist', from *Women, Race & Class*,



• A protestor at the the Bell Hotel, Epping

offers a foundational critique of this myth, tracing its role in justifying racial terror under the guise of protecting white womanhood. Her analysis remains vital for understanding the contemporary resurgence of far-right mobilisations, which often manifest through reactionary protests and riots cloaked in concern for public safety.

What these movements reveal is not genuine concern for women's safety, but its instrumentalisation for nationalist ends. Empathy is selectively applied – performed rather than felt – serving as a mechanism of control rather than care.

In her essay, Davis exposes the myth as a formidable artifice conceived by racism – meticulously fabricated to incite violence and terror against the Black community, not only without repercussions, but with chilling justification that dignified the act of lynching itself. The most infamous example remains the lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy in Mississippi, brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. His abduction and killing continue to haunt the American conscience, revealing the enduring violence embedded in this racial myth.

Davis argues that in the aftermath of emancipation – and the subsequent loss of enslavers' profits and control – lynching became a tool to reassert dominance. It was framed as a defender



of white womanhood, a narrative often propagated by white women themselves. Figures like Jean MacKellar advanced the theory that Black men were inherently prone to sexual violence, reinforcing the myth's grip on public imagination.

Sound familiar?

The same white men who vilify men of colour as threats to women are themselves far from innocent. Those men are not feminists who are working towards dismantling rape culture and the prevalence of domestic violence, these far-right figures deflect attention from their own abusive histories.

Data obtained through Freedom of Information requests reveals that two out of every five individuals arrested during last year's race riots had previously been reported to police for domestic abuse. In fact, an estimated 41% of the 899 people arrested had records related to intimate partner violence – a primary source of abuse and sexual assault against women in the UK.

Paul Golding, leader of Britain First and organiser of the recent anti-immigration march in Manchester, exemplifies this hypocrisy. In a leaked conversation with his partner, Golding admits to having "laid a finger" on two women – one of whom confronts him directly in the recording. He attempts to justify his actions by

claiming his partner was "driving him psychologically crazy," equating emotional distress with physical violence in a disturbing attempt to rationalise abuse. Lois Shearing's *Pink-Pilled* powerfully extends Angela Davis's critique by exposing the ideological framework through which far-right men perceive women – particularly white women – not as autonomous individuals, but as property. Within this logic, women are treated as high-value commodities to be guarded, akin to land or wealth. After all, how else can these ideologues pursue their fantasies of racial purity and nationalist rebirth?

In this worldview, assaults committed by men of colour are not framed as violations of women's bodily autonomy, but as transgressions against white male ownership. Punishment is demanded not in pursuit of justice, but to reassert patriarchal and racial control. Angela Davis identifies a crucial dimension of lynching's function: its economic beneficiaries. Racial terror was not only a tool of white supremacy—it was a mechanism for cementing Black people as the most exploitable labour class, forming the foundation of a working class that sustained capitalist expansion. More insidiously, it fractured the possibility of cross-racial class solidarity. Racial division, Davis argues, is capitalism's most effective deception – obscuring the identity of the true oppressor.

It is no coincidence that far-right riots are intensifying today. Amid economic crisis, austerity, and widespread social discontent, the same mechanisms of scapegoating and division are being revived with renewed ferocity. The recent protests – many of which have coalesced outside refugee centres – are not simply reactions to economic precarity. They are expressions of entitlement, violent assertions of who gets to wield sexual and physical power over women. In this climate of intensified precarity, whiteness becomes the sole remaining asset for many white men – a fragile currency through which they assert dominance. That assertion is enacted through gendered violence, a symbolic and literal claim to power. It is a symbiotic relationship: economic disenfranchisement fuels racial loyalty, and racial loyalty legitimises violence. Together, they produce fertile ground for extremism.

The true architects behind these eruptions are the capitalist classes – those who have not only tolerated but actively shaped the normalisation of racist narratives in public discourse. Their complicity is not passive. Even centrist-liberal parties have echoed the rhetoric of the far right, legitimising the very narratives that fuel these protests. When Keir Starmer described the UK as an "Island of Strangers," he echoed the spectral tones of Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech – repackaged for a new era of polite xenophobia.

We live in a perilous world, shaped by systems built on the exploitation of class, race, and gender. These systems are not static – they evolve, often violently, reshaping identities and relationships with disturbing ease. What recent events reveal is not merely the resurgence of nationalism, but a deep fatigue and disillusionment with a country many once hoped could be better.

As previously noted, the assertion of a monopoly on violence against women is not incidental – it is central. And as socio-economic disparity deepens, whiteness becomes increasingly brittle, perhaps the only asset these rioters feel they possess. Coupled with the manipulations of capital, we must brace ourselves for further eruptions – unless meaningful socio-economic transformation is achieved. That transformation must be led not by reactionary forces, but by a revitalised labour movement committed to justice, solidarity, and structural change.

1840Emergence of the
Enthusiasts
(Entuzjastki)

Founded by Narcyza Żmichowska, a radical circle of female writers, activists, and thinkers; advocated for women's independence and challenged the notion of women as second-class citizens. Its feminist mission was often sidelined by nationalist circles, which prioritised Poland's sovereignty over gender and class issues during the partitions.

1891-1940Kazimiera
Bujwidowa's
Educational Reforms

- co-founds Women's Library in Kraków
- establishes a Girls' High School with a curriculum equal to that of boys' schools.
- leads campaigns for women's access to higher education.

1905Feminist schism post
Russian Revolution

Feminists split between legalists and pro-independence socialists. The latter join the Combat Organisation of the Polish Socialist Party, who believe women's rights would follow national independence won through armed struggle.

1882Founding of 'Flying
University'

Jadwiga Szczawińska launches clandestine education for women under Russian rule. Alumni include Maria Skłodowska-Curie and Zofia Nałkowska, as well as Marxist Ludwik Joachim Franciszek Krzywicki.

**1897**Women admitted
to Jagiellonian
University

Becomes the first Polish University to admit women.

**1906**Women
become faculty at
Jagiellonian
University

A major step towards gender parity in academia.

1895Launch of Ster by
Paulina Kuczalska-
Reinschmit

Kuczalska-Reinschmit, dubbed the 'hetman of Polish feminism', founds Ster, a pioneering feminist periodical. Contributors include prominent writers Maria Konopnicka, Eliza Orzeszkowa, and artist Maria Dulębianka.



AND 1840-2025

Dominika Szarek

1907

Founding of the Union for Equal Rights of Polish Women

Established by Kuczalska-Reinschmit to advocate for women's legal & political equality.

WARSAW WOMEN'S CONGRESS

Zofia Nałkowsk makes a speech denouncing bourgeois hypocrisy and male moral binaries, demanding full social liberation for women:

"We demand all of life. A man can know the fullness of life, because he lives as a man and as a human being. But for a woman, there is only a fraction of life – she has to be either a woman or a human being."

1920s-30s

Radical Feminist Voices

Irena Krzywicka and Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka challenge taboos: abortion, sexuality, polyamory.

- abortion punishable by up to 5 years in prison.

1970s-80s

Women in Labour and Education

- Women reach 90% employment rate by 1980s.
- Women's higher education rate doubles, yet leadership roles remain limited.
- Gender roles persist despite formal equality.

1931

First Birth Control Clinic

- founded by Krzywicka and Budzińska-Tylicka
- offers contraceptive advice, not abortions.

1980

Birth of Solidarity

- Anna Walentynowicz's dismissal from shipyard sparks mass movement.
- Solidarity becomes a legal opposition force.
- Walentynowicz is hailed as the "mother of independent Poland."



1908

Maria Dulebianca runs for office

First Polish woman to stand for national election in Galicia. Her candidacy is annulled: legal barriers remain.



1956

Abortion Legalised

- available on request under 'communist' rule
- Poland is regional reproductive services hub.

1918

Women win suffrage

- Poland regains independence
- Suffragettes pressure Piłsudski, banging umbrellas on his villa windows.
- Women gain the right to vote and stand for office.

1989

Round Table Talks

- Transition to democracy begins.
- Catholic Church dominates negotiations.
- women nearly excluded: only two female participants
- lays groundwork for future abortion restrictions.

OVERLEAF

1993

Family Planning Act

- Abortion restricted to rape, threat to life, or foetal impairment.
- Language reflects Catholic moral framing: 'conceived child', 'mother'.

2020

Abortion nearly banned; Women outnumber men in higher education

- Constitutional Tribunal outlaws abortion due to foetal defects.
- triggers largest protest since 'communism': Strajk Kobiet
- Women are 63% of graduates, 68% of postgraduates, and 53% of doctoral students.

2016

Family Planning Act

- mass mobilisation against total abortion ban
- Black umbrellas echo 1918 suffragette tactics.
- Feminist resistance resurges.



2023

PiS Government Defeated

- Right-wing PiS voted out.
- Centrist coalition formed.
- Reproductive rights remain untouched.
- Women's labour force participation hits 72.4%: above the EU average.



2024

Record Numbers of Female MPs in Parliament

- 136 females elected to sit in the Sejm (lower house, equivalent to UK House of Commons). The 29.6% rate is above the global average (24.3%), but below EU-wide average of 32.7%
- Poland's coalition government launches a pilot programme for pharmacies willing to provide the morning-after pill without a doctor's prescription 1,050 of the 1200 pharmacies in Poland subscribe to the programme.

8 MARCH 2025

Abotak opens in Warsaw

Abotak, a symbolic 'abortion clinic', is launched by the Abortion Dream Team on International Women's Day:

- provides information, emotional support, and a safe space for self-managed abortion using pills ordered online
- becomes a quiet yet powerful act of feminist resistance in a country where abortion access is criminalised
- faces regular harassment from anti-abortion protesters, creating barriers for those seeking care.

Second-wave feminist goals eg. access to contraception and bodily autonomy, remain unrealised.

Poland ranks lowest in Europe for contraceptive access, and has done since 2019 (2025 Contraception Policy Atlas)



Support women's rights in Poland:
Aborcyjny Dream Team: www.adt.pl
Dziewuchy Dziewuchom www.dziewuchydziewuchom.pl



and, finally, Unison itself. She became one of its five Assistant General Secretaries (AGS) in 1998. This background matters because with it comes a political mindset and training, and a structural position relative to ordinary 'rank and file' trade union members, that make her unfit to lead a union of public sector workers. She's not fit for the job! She simply doesn't represent us, understand our struggles, or feel the same need that we do to fight back against the daily grind. In fact, she presides over an organisation that, in its ways of operating and in much of its ethos, often holds us back from fighting to improve our lives.

McAnea has benefitted for years from the high pay of an AGS and, since 2021, GS. In 2023, McAnea received a salary of £125,450 (before tax) plus London Weighting of £6,273, and pension contributions of £4,826. Compare that to the median gross annual earnings for full-time employees: in April 2024 these were £37,430, and 50% of workers – and certainly most Unison members – earned less than that.

Added to this, the GS enjoys paid expenses, hotel stays, trips abroad, free meals, and a generous pension, as well as high status, recognition, and power. Most of this is paid for from Unison members' dues. She's not one of us; she doesn't feel our pain.

So what have we got for our money? McAnea has followed in the footsteps of Prentis by not rocking the boat for Tory and now Labour governments, and has failed, like her mentor, to organise any resistance to the ongoing onslaught against public services and public sector workers.

Now she pretends she will hold the Labour Government's feet to the fire while in fact she is leading no effective fight for improved public sector funding; and she is promoting Labour's inadequate Employment Rights Bill to members as the best thing since sliced bread. Pretty standard for a GS, and McAnea is far from the worst, but it doesn't have to be like this at all. We need a fight in our unions against bureaucracy, which McAnea's record represents. Our fight must be against the whole breadth of bureaucracy though, not just those at the top: we recognise that lay representatives – that is, ordinary workers who become trade union activists – can themselves get sucked into giving the bosses an easy ride. But certainly we need to change those at the top

UNIONS

UNISON GENERAL SECRETARY ELECTION: ELECT ANDREA EGAN AND FIGHT FOR UNION DEMOCRACY!

By a Unison activist

With 1.3 million members, one million of them women, the UK's biggest trade union Unison is gearing up to elect its next General Secretary (GS). The ballot opens on 28 October 2025 and runs until 25 November 2025. This person will lead the union through a vital five years for the UK labour movement. We need to get this right!

The incumbent, Christina McAnea, is the union's third GS, succeeding the right-wing Dave Prentis – now Baron Prentis of Leeds – who ran the union for 20 years. Though something is made of her being a woman leader, Christina's gender has made zero difference to the way she has led. She has followed closely in the

footsteps of Prentis and any other right-wing, business-as-usual leader.

And whatever the outcome of this election, McAnea will probably follow Prentis into the House of Lords, honoured, like him, for services to trade union bureaucracy.

McAnea's career is a far cry from the experience of most Unison members, who are in the main low-paid workers in health, local government, and education – sectors suffering after decades of underfunding.

McAnea has been directly employed by trade unions for over 40 years, first with the GMB, then NALGO – one of the three unions that merged to create Unison –

and the way they govern: McAnea sits complacently at the pinnacle of the edifice and has no intention to change it. She's the woman leader of a trade union that's doing little to improve women workers' lives.

THE WOMEN LEADERS WE NEED

What should it mean to represent women workers and lead their union? A representative of women workers knows what it's like to struggle to pay bills and therefore wants to fight for better pay, she knows what it's like to be exploited and oppressed at work and therefore learns to defend herself and her colleagues; she does her union activities alongside her day job, she is a volunteer, which is the bedrock of union organisation. She takes risks, she leads struggles, because she has to and because the union won't grow or develop any strength without it.

But it's not just about being a woman worker; it's about holding and promoting politics that fight for women workers, about leading and supporting their struggles for better pay and conditions at work, opposing job cuts and fighting to improve public services and the communities they serve. It's about standing up to might, and making life difficult for politicians, including Labour politicians. It's about carrying the fight into the political sphere; for Unison activists, it's about using the union's Labour Link structures to demand more from the Labour government, and demand that they implement Unison's policies. It is decades since McAnea knew any of that – if she ever did.

Nor does McAnea's manifesto even say anything about women's representation in Unison or about Unison's self-organised groups and structures, which include women. She doesn't even pay lip service

to what is often lip service. She has to go!

THE LEFT-WING ALTERNATIVE

Mounting a left-wing challenge to McAnea will be Andrea Egan, a social worker and the branch secretary of Bolton Unison Local Government Branch.

Unlike McAnea, who has been a full-time official of Unison for most of her working life, Egan is what we call a lay activist, and one with 30+ years experience. If elected she has pledged to take only the equivalent of her current salary and donate the rest back to the union.

Egan was central to the recent brief left-wing leadership of Unison's National Executive Council and instigated some of the policies McAnea is now claiming credit for in her manifesto, including a moderately successful new organising strategy, 'Organising to Win', which at least sets out to win and has won some recent industrial battles.

The next GS will serve five years at a crucial time for UK politics. She will face the challenge from Reform, including frighteningly its growing support among UK workers.

She will need to fight for more funding for public services, and, on the political front, for more sustainable public services in a world facing a climate crisis.

Which candidate is best suited politically and temperamentally for the role of leading and representing Unison? Andrea Egan, by a country mile.

In the GS election in 2020, McAnea won with 47.7% of the vote, with opposition votes split between three left or ostensibly left candidates. The turnout was just 10.5%.

It will take a big mobilisation by the left and rank and file activists to win this election, and then to ensure that Unison members benefit from it. In a straight contest between Egan and McAnea, just a small increase in turnout could favour the left. It won't be easy, but everyone on the left or who wants to support women workers should throw themselves into the fight to elect Andrea Egan!

She's our woman!

Andrea4GeneralSecretary campaign:
andrea4gs.org.uk

More on trade union bureaucratism:
bit.ly/fightbureaucracy

ORGANISE WITH US

Workers' Liberty members organise in our workplaces and trade unions for socialist politics and trans-inclusive, class struggle feminism. Inside Workers' Liberty, we have industrial "fractions", corresponding to the industries in which we work, so that we can coordinate, discuss and plan our interventions, and support each other in local efforts. Our industrial fractions include: education, rail, healthcare, fire and rescue, local government and the civil service. To organise with us, write to: office@workersliberty.org.



HISTORY

CLAUDE CAHUN AND MARCEL MOORE: SURREALISM IN REBELLION

Kelly Rogers

On 25 July 1944, Lucy Schwob and On 25 July 1944, Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe were out in St. Helier, Jersey. The island was occupied by the Nazis. While Lucy kept watch, Suzanne took a cigarette paper and stuck it to the windshield of a police car. It carried a message: "The cowardly bureaucrats of the police, who live on lies and shameful cruelty, will be destroyed by the soldiers with no names." They bought a new packet of cigarette papers at a newsstand, intending to turn them into notes for the Nazis that night, before boarding a bus home.



• Claude Cahun, Self-portrait 1914

The bus came to an abrupt stop, and a German soldier ordered everyone to disembark for an inspection. When it was her turn to be questioned, Lucy told the soldier that, though she was born in France, she had lived in Jersey for thirty years. It was a lie. The two women, lovers, had moved to Jersey from Paris only three years previously. They had spent the previous two decades in the burgeoning surrealist movement, creating what the Nazis viewed as "degenerate art", and organising with communists. The soldier seemed to accept the lie, and they were able to go home.

Later that day, they would be arrested.

CLAUDE CAHUN & MARCEL MOORE

Lucy and Suzanne, step-sisters, had been in love since they were teenagers. They adopted the gender-neutral monikers Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, which they used in artistic and political circles.

Cahun was never famous in her lifetime. She published some articles in literary magazines, participated in a handful of small exhibitions, and in 1929 translated Havelock Ellis's *The Task of Social Hygiene* into French. But with plenty of inherited

money, she had no need to make a living from her writing or photography. She was free to devote herself to her art, and the body of work she produced was a free-wheeling exploration of gender, sexuality and identity.

Today, she is most famous for her photography – often labelled as self-portraits but by and large produced in collaboration with Moore – in which she plays with her appearance, and adopts gender-bending, androgynous personas. She shaved her head in 1916 and from 1919 she dyed her crew cut pink or green: acts of rebellion against traditional notions of feminine beauty. In her journals, written in the 1920s, she wrote: "I shave my head, wrench out my teeth, my breasts – anything that is embarrassing or annoying to look at – stomach, ovaries, the brain, conscious and covered in cysts."

Cahun is now widely heralded as a queer or transgender pioneer, labels that didn't exist at the time. In one essay, she spoke about her identity as such: "Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me." One of her poems, dedicated to Moore, was titled 'Les Jeux Uraniens' ('The Uranian Games'). "Uranian" was a broad term that psychologists

had adopted to describe people – also referred to as belonging to a "third sex" – who were gender non-conforming, felt same-sex desire, or both.

Cahun also didn't speak of herself as a lesbian, but her attitude towards homosexuality was forthright. In 1925, in response to the forced closure of homosexual magazine *Inversions*, she wrote: "My opinion on homosexuality and homosexuals is exactly the same as my opinion on heterosexuality and heterosexuals... I uphold people's rights to behave as they wish."

THE SURREALISTS

In 1932, she joined the surrealists.

In her anthology, *Surrealist Women*, Penelope Rosemont writes: "To start... with what is perhaps the single most common misperception, surrealism most emphatically does not signify unreality, or a denial of the real, or a 'refusal to accept reality.' It insists, rather, on more reality, a higher reality." In short: surrealism seeks to shatter the ideological constraints shaping the way we see the world. As such, surrealists oppose literary and artistic values – technical mastery, talent, taste, and so on – because these uphold a particular political and cultural worldview, and so (as Rosemont puts it) come "part and parcel of the institutions of unfreedom". Surrealism is, at its core, an adventure in revolt.

Although originally conceived purely as a revolution of the spirit or mind, it took only a few short months for the first surrealist group to realise that their revolution could only take place in the context of the transformation of society as whole. They began to study Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and other communists, and over the following years the names of revolutionaries like Rosa Luxemburg, Nadezhda Krupskaya and Louise Michel would appear in surrealist publications.

One of the defining documents of the surrealist movement is the manifesto 'Towards a Free Revolutionary Art', published in 1938 under the signatures of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and French surrealist André Breton. Breton later made clear that it was the product of discussions with Trotsky – and, in fact, that large sections were penned by him directly – when the three met in Mexico, where Trotsky was living in exile. The manifesto calls for the absolute freedom of expression in art, criticising both fascist and Stalinist regimes for suppressing independent, creative

expression. Art and revolution, they argue, are natural allies, but enforcing any particular kind of "revolutionary art" runs counter to human freedom, and artists have a moral duty to resist conformity. They write: "If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralised control, to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should be from the first established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above!" The manifesto concludes with their aims: "The independence of art – for the revolution. The revolution – for the complete liberation of art!"

LIBERATED WOMEN

Critics of the surrealist movement have dubbed it a "men's club," but what is most remarkable is not that surrealism's proponents reflected the sexism of interwar France, but the extent to which they rejected it. Their literature and art continually railed against the apparatus of patriarchal oppression – church, state, family, the military, the nation and capital – and at a time when Marxist and anarchist organisations tended to ignore gender and sexuality, the surrealists held open group discussions on the topic.

The first women surrealists rebelled against traditional femininity. Like many "liberated" women in the interwar years, they wore their hair and skirts short, smoked, drank, and experimented with drugs, all-night parties and uninhibited sex. They also engaged in early surrealist activities, like refusing to go to church or salute the flag. Key individuals distinguished themselves in those early days of the movement, and were important in orienting surrealism towards communist politics. Simone Kahn, who was married to Breton from 1921-31 and is credited with persuading him to split with the Dadaists, was said to be the only person in the surrealist milieu of the time to have actually read Marx's *Capital* from beginning to end. By the 1930s, women's involvement in surrealism had exploded, and they were contributing political theory, cosigning collective tracts, participating in group demonstrations, and exhibiting their works in major surrealist exhibitions.

INDIRECT ACTION

As the economic depression of the 1930s hit, women – alongside immigrants, homosexuals, and revolutionary workers' organisations – were turned into scapegoats. A series of scandals made headlines, provoking a nationwide backlash against women's liberation. In



• I am in training don't kiss me, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, c.1927

1933, for instance, a young woman called Violette Nozières poisoned her parents, killing her father. From the age of twelve, Nozières had been repeatedly raped by her father, an influential public figure, who counted the president of France amongst his friends. Nevertheless, she received no sympathy from the French press, who portrayed her as a prostitute – her guilt compounded by the revelation that she liked dancing, listening to jazz, and drinking cocktails. Only one group rose to her defence: the surrealists, who published a pamphlet celebrating her, to which nearly all of the better-known surrealists of the day contributed.

It was in this context that Claude Cahun joined the movement. In 1934, she wrote her most important political work, *Les Paris Sont Ouverts* (often translated as *'Place Your Bets'*). In this essay, she writes: "The dadaist-surrealist experiment... can and should serve the cause of working-class emancipation.

Only when the proletariat has become conscious of the real meaning of the myths that uphold capitalist culture – will working men and women be able, as a class, to proceed to their own self-development." Foreshadowing the themes in Breton and Rivera's manifesto, she goes on to criticise the French Communist Party, in particular Louis Aragon's attempts to appropriate art for political ends. She argues that creative expression must remain autonomous and unpredictable, and resist being turned into simplistic propaganda. Instead, the best revolutionary art works through "indirect action", engaging the unconscious mind, provoking reflection, and disrupting preconceived ideas.

During the same period, she signed two important tracts of the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (AEAR): *Protest!* in March 1933, which attacked the growth of Nazism in Germany, and *Against fascism* but also against French

imperialism! in May 1933. While a member of the AEAR, she joined forces with the Trotskyists, practically all of them surrealists. In 1938, Breton launched the anti-fascist International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI). It counted Cahun amongst its members. Her brief involvement in FIARI would be her final political activity in France.

REBELLION

In 1937, with Cahun suffering with a series of chronic illnesses, the pair moved to the quieter setting of Jersey. Three years later, when the island was invaded and occupied by the Nazis, the pair refused to leave, despite Cahun being part-Jewish. They discarded their artist personas, and once again lived as Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe.

Many Jersey locals took part in small acts of defiance, including theft, black marketeering, writing anti-Nazi graffiti, and distributing leaflets. Although these efforts never culminated in an organised resistance movement, over the course of the war, approximately four thousand Channel Islanders were sentenced for violating German regulations, Lucy and Suzanne amongst them.

The pair would purchase German-language magazines, chop them up and reassemble them into satirical photomontages, before slipping them back into newsstands. They would write messages on cigarette packets and leave them in places where soldiers might find them. "OHNE ENDE" ("without end") was one slogan of choice. They hoped to convey the idea that Hitler's expansionist project would lead to never-ending war, with ordinary soldiers paying the price. It was a deliberate choice to appeal to the soldiers' self-interest, in their own language.

They soon began writing longer letters, pretending to be disillusioned German soldiers – "the soldiers with no names". It was Lucy's belief that they could convince the lower-ranking men to turn against their officers. They developed a cast of characters, with distinct voices, to give the impression of a growing rebellion in the ranks, but every message had a common goal – to persuade the soldiers who found them to desert and go home. One note read:

"HITLER leads us...
GOEBBELS speaks for us...
GÖRING gorges himself for us...
LEY drinks for us..."

HIMMLER? Himmler murders for us...
But nobody dies for us!"

This note is strikingly propagandistic, not the subtle "indirect action" that Lucy had argued for in *Les Paris Sont Ouverts*. But the pair also produced thousands of poems, songs, satirical drawings, cryptic phrases, and snippets of dialogue that were designed to linger in the mind. It's also notable that none of their messages criticised the Nazis' racial ideology directly. Instead, they chose to meet the soldiers where they were, and focus their efforts on fomenting resentment against the war.

It was Suzanne who tended to surreptitiously slip the notes into the pocket, boot or briefcase of an unsuspecting soldier, while Lucy kept watch – but this wasn't the only dangerous activity that the pair undertook. They listened to BBC reports on an illegal wireless and shared news with other islanders, and sheltered escaped prisoners from Jersey's forced labour camp.

IMPRISONMENT

In the end, it was a Jersey resident – the woman who had sold them their cigarette papers as they made their way back from St. Helier – who reported them to the authorities, and on 25 July Lucy and Suzanne were arrested. On their way to prison, the two women each swallowed the pills that they had bought

in anticipation of the day they would be caught. Suicide was their final act of joint resistance.

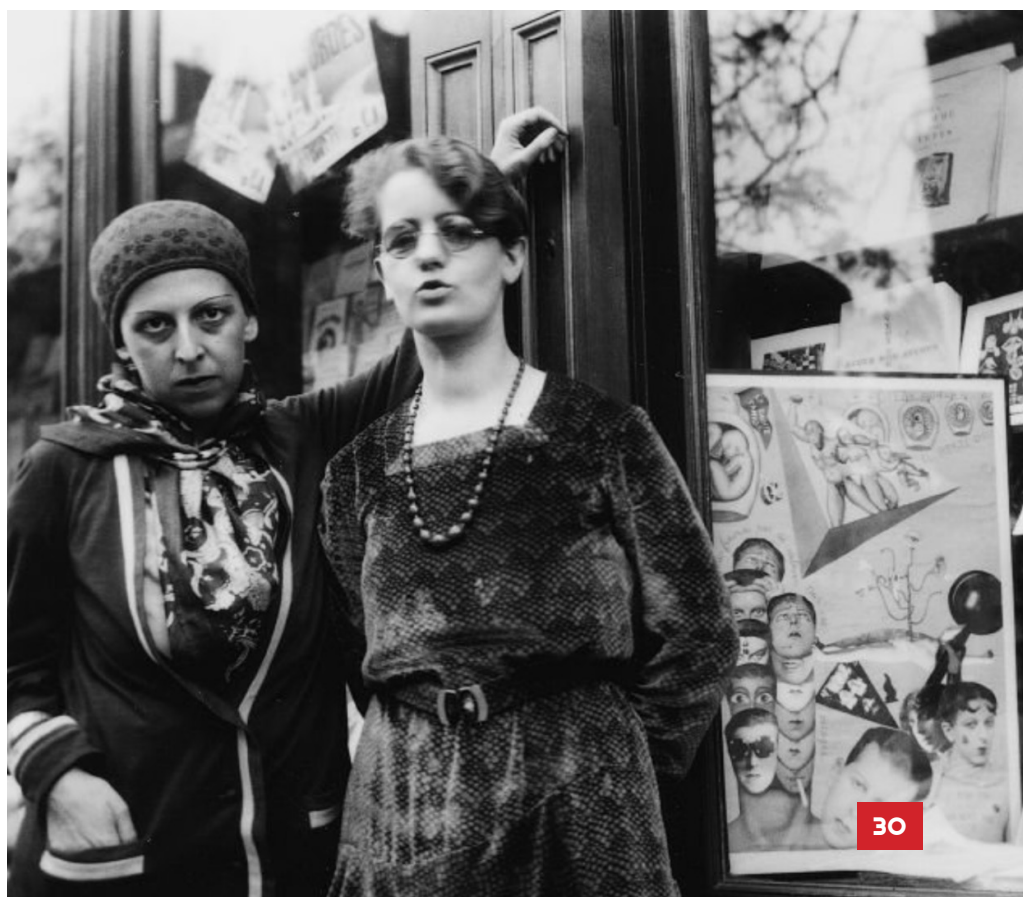
It took more than a week for the pair to wake up and regain their right minds. The dose hadn't been enough to kill them.

In her memoirs, Suzanne speaks generously of her jailors: "They were kind. They undoubtedly at times ran a certain risk in disobeying orders. They were all obviously men who by temperament would prefer to be kind if it were not made too dangerous for them."

Lucy made connections with other prisoners, including several disgraced German soldiers. They passed notes between cells, shared contact information, and promised to find one another after the war was over. Lucy and Suzanne, held in separate cells, also kept in touch by passing messages via a make-shift "postal system" made of scraps of toilet paper or sanitary towels pulled through the ventilation system on pieces of string.

Lucy and Suzanne were sentenced to death. They had not offered any defence for their actions. The judge presiding over their trial said: "You are francs-tireurs," using the French term for guerrilla fighters. "It is indeed a more serious crime. With firearms, one knows at once what damage has been done, but with spiritual arms, one cannot tell how far

• Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, 1929



reaching it may be."

The Germans tried to persuade them to appeal for clemency. They refused, believing that asking for mercy would be a kind of self-denial. The military court filed an appeal on their behalf, and on 20 February 1945 their death sentence was commuted, in exchange for ten years penal servitude. According to the order, they were to remain in solitary confinement, but their jailors had become more and more lax with prison regulations as news reached Jersey of Germany's losses in the war. They opened doors for the prisoners, allowed the free passage of food, tobacco and notes, and moved the two lovers into a shared cell.

On 8 May 1945, as the Channel Islands were surrendered to the Allied forces, the guards received the order to release Lucy and Suzanne.

THE LUXURY OF RESISTANCE

Writing about her wartime experiences, Lucy reflected on how they had found themselves in a very different situation from that of their French comrades. Although they were under occupation like those in Paris, they had been cut off from their friends and networks. Lucy saw that isolation as a gift. She believed that, had they been in France, they would have had to limit their activity to keep their comrades safe, or – worse – they may have ended up falling silent. But these two lovers on Jersey were able to act as free agents. Resistance was a luxury. "Perhaps Jersey," she wrote, "was almost the only place where that luxury could be indulged in."

Lucy died of cancer in 1954. In 1972, almost two decades later, Suzanne died by suicide. Their artistic work was rediscovered in the 1990s, and they gradually gained recognition for their contributions to surrealism, as well as their exploration of "queerness" before its time. They were communists and antifascists, who, despite being held in a Nazi jail, never faltered in their belief that they could appeal to the humanity of their captors.

In a letter to a friend, written towards the end of her life, Lucy said about herself: "I'm an asocial rebel and a revolutionary dreamer... Without this love of revolution, which has no sex or fatherland, I would have died of hatred or greed."

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

THE FIGHT FOR 52

Kelly Rogers is a Control Officer at the London Fire Brigade and workplace rep with the Fire Brigades Union.

Since the spring of 2023, the Fire Brigades Union, led by its women's section, has been pushing fire service employers to deliver 52 weeks of full pay maternity leave.

The campaign – Fight for 52 – has had a fair amount of success. Until the 2024 pay negotiations, the national baseline for maternity pay was just six weeks on 90% pay, followed by twelve weeks on 50%. Now, it is six months on full pay.

But the provision of maternity pay in the sector remains a postcode lottery. In the majority of the UK's 49 separate fire and rescue services, you get the national baseline. If you're in London, it's nine months on full pay and three months on half pay. In the West Midlands, management have already conceded the full 52 weeks.

The FBU is an outlier in the British trade union movement, with very high density (somewhere between 80 and 90%) and collective bargaining through the fire service's National Joint Council (NJC).

With a 90% male workforce, the FBU also benefits from the fact that improving maternity pay is a relatively cheap ask for the employers. Given this, and the union's otherwise strong industrial position, its women members could be forgiven for asking why it took so long to make maternity pay a national negotiating priority.



THE OCCUPATIONAL CASE

Firefighting is a physical task, and often a gruelling one. If you're heavily pregnant or post-partum, it is impractical for an employer to expect you to scale the side of a tall building on a swaying ladder to carry out a rescue; or run up and down a dozen flights of stairs in full breathing apparatus, carrying an unconscious resident; or stand for hours without shade in a burning field in full gear and 35 degree heat.

Even more pressingly, there is the issue of fire contaminants and occupational exposure. The UK and its Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (the IIAC, a body which is, to put it politely, stitched up) is decades behind North America, Australia and many European countries when it comes to prevention, regular health monitoring, and financial recognition of disease.

Firefighters are exposed to PFAS ('forever chemicals') in firefighting foam, and to all manner of toxic effluents in smoke. Firefighters are more than three times



• Fight for 52, image courtesy of the FBU website

more likely to die of leukemia, and more than twice as likely to die from esophageal cancer, than the general public. Those aged 35-39 are three times more likely to have cancer than their peers of the same age. The incidence of cardiovascular and pulmonary disease (aside from cancer) is also much worse. The data is likely to get more damning as research continues to be published.

For this reason, pregnant women are taken 'off the run' – i.e. moved away from frontline duties. Breastfeeding mothers are also, in many services, given non-operational duties; and many firefighters choose to move to bottle feeding when they return to work. There is substantial evidence to suggest that breastfeeding passes on occupational exposure to infants.

THE FEMINIST CASE

To a great extent, then, the FBU's progress on maternity pay is contingent on its industrial strength and the occupational nature of firefighting. But why shouldn't everyone get 12 months of full pay maternity leave?

In Norway, parents are granted 59 weeks of paid leave at 80% of salary or 49 weeks at 100% of salary. In Germany, birthing mothers are granted 14 weeks at full salary, followed by up to 3 years of parental leave, which can be shared, with around 65% of lost salary covered by parental allowance. In Sweden, parents are entitled to 480 days of paid leave, 390 days of which are paid at 80% of salary. A minimum of 90 days is reserved for each parent, and leave can be taken until the child turns 12.

The UK is tight-fisted by comparison. If you're unlucky enough to work somewhere without a properly negotiated maternity policy, you'll end up with the statutory minimum. Under this, mothers are entitled to 52 weeks off, but are limited to only six weeks of 90% pay, and are then put on Statutory Maternity Pay of £187.18 per week for the remaining 39 weeks.

To make matters worse, mothers are left on their own very soon after their child is born. After just two weeks, paternity leave (which in any case is unpaid) ends and

the other parent goes back to work.

This is a maternity policy from another era. It assumes that the dad, or non-birthing partner, is earning the family's main income. If the birthing mother is the breadwinner, or even if her income is essential for the family's subsistence, she must return to work after just six weeks. Free childcare (limited to 30 hours per week) starts at nine months – so what exactly is the family supposed to do?

WHAT ABOUT THE DADS?

While the Fight for 52 continues, FBU members are turning their attention to paternity leave. At the last FBU conference, held in May this year, a motion was brought calling for a campaign for six weeks at full pay for non-birthing partners. The motion was remitted to the Executive Committee, after the leadership declared its support for the motion, but suggested that the union look into the possibility of a more radical demand.

All of this might seem humdrum and piecemeal – not least because the demand for decent parental leave is so basic that calling it "radical" does violence to the term. But that is where we are. The demand for decent maternity pay, and decent paternity pay, is an essential one, not just for our quality of life but for our ability to be active in politics, class struggle and the fight for liberation.

CONGRATULATIONS

A special note of congratulations to Kelly Rogers, who relaunched 'Women's Fightback' and has acted as editor of the magazine since, and her partner Michael who have welcomed their first child into the world during the production of this issue of 'Women's Fightback'. In true Fightback style, baby has already attended her first picket line, supporting the RMT workers currently on strike for better workplace conditions and a shorter working week. Transport for London has lost over 2000 members of staff since COVID-19 – meaning that workers often work gruelling overtime on top of their working week causing risks to physical and mental health. But with the support of Kelly, Michael and their daughter, among others, who knows what could be won? Congratulations and best wishes to Kelly and Michael as they embark on parenthood together.

ISRAEL OUT OF GAZA AND THE WEST BANK! STOP THE KILLING!

As Israel's violence escalates in Gaza, with over 60,000 already dead, and the Israel Defense Forces now moving to flatten Gaza City, driving Gaza's 2.1 million population into a smaller and smaller area, as famine takes hold, as in the West Bank Jewish settlers are emboldened and attack Palestinians and take their land, it is crucial not to despair.

We support the continued international protests and demands for arms embargoes, targeted sanctions, and recognition of the state of Palestine.

We must combine this with renewed efforts of solidarity with the internal opposition within Israel, especially that of Palestinian citizens and binational movements such as Standing Together.

Demonstrations against the war and in opposition to Netanyahu in Israel have increased as the violence has increased against the Palestinians. There is mounting despair at the fate of the few remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas and other Islamist groups inside Gaza. But there is also growing awareness among Israeli Jews of the suffering that Netanyahu's government is unleashing on the Palestinians. Anti-war demonstrations are bigger than before; more Israelis are refusing military call-up.

Sunday 17 August saw the most significant protests in Israel against the war since it began. An estimated 2.5 million people, around 25% of the population of the country, took part in demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of direct action. Protesters blocked

SUPPORT THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT IN ISRAEL!

highways and shut down major city centres. Some groups of workers walked out or took the day off work.

Too much of the international left dismisses the possibility that Israeli workers can be allies in the fight for peace, but when they dismiss groups such as Standing Together they are not helping the Palestinian cause, they are harming it. Standing Together are not 'normalising' Israel – they are bringing together Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel to build a peace movement!

Two states – a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel – remains the eventual political remedy to the plight of the Palestinians. But short of that, Palestinians in Gaza desperately need the massacre to stop. Israeli workers – both Jewish workers and Palestinian citizens of Israel – are crucial to stopping this war and bringing down Netanyahu and his far-right government. The people doing this work deserve our support and they need it now more than ever!

Standing Together: standing-together.org
UK Friends of Standing Together (FOST):
ukfost.co.uk



• Rula Daood and Alon-Lee Green

'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.

Subscribe to 'Women's Fightback' and get free p&p. Four issues for £12.
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Workers' Liberty hosts monthly socialist feminist book clubs in London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Leicester and online. All welcome!

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