refuge workers fight for rights

By Rosie Weston

Women’s refuge workers in London are fighting a £6,000 pay cut. So the refuge where I work as a health visitor mostly of the women workers are themselves survivors of abuse, and have worked for years in the refuge setting, with extensive training and experience.

Recently, the refuge service was put out to tender by the local council and the contract awarded to Hestia, a housing charity founded in 1970, whose stated aim was to provide a service for London’s vulnerable homeless population. In this case, at the first meeting with the refuge staff after transfer (seven women working across five refuges), Hestia announced that they would have to accept a £6,000 a year pay cut, reduction in holiday pay, increased working hours and reduced sick pay, and that these changes would take place in the next two years.

One of the workers commented that for an organisation committed to preventing homelessness they were going a good way to making her home- less. The seven women are united in refusing to accept the new conditions. They refused individual meetings and insisted on joint consultation. They are being supported by Unite, and Hestia have been forced to extend the period of consultation. The tendering-out process sections workers off into tiny groups. With- out a generalised response across Hestia’s housing services it is difficult to fight.

In every refuge where Hestia have taken the contract it has attacked the terms and conditions of the workers in the most heavy-handed way. It is known for paying below the rates offered by other specialist domestic violence organisa- tions such as Refuge and Women’s Aid.

But women who have survived domestic abuse themselves and devol- oped a strong refusal to be bullied are now resist- ing. Refuge workers fight for rights
The ability to control conception has been one of the most significant material changes in women's lives in modern times. The last few decades have seen dramatic changes in attitudes towards sex, contraception, and women's role in society more broadly. But have they brought the "sexual revolution" promised? "Socialist feminists understand women's oppression in relationship to both class and gender. In capitalist society, the work of reproducing the labour force — bringing up children, caring for extended families — has primarily been done by women. That remains the case, even though women's participation in waged work has increased substantially in recent decades. Capitalist societies have developed and refined ideological frameworks to justify particular roles for women. The work that has been done by women to bring up children, for example, is portrayed as our "natural" role, an extension of the natural role in giving birth. The most obvious impact of the Pill is that women are having fewer children — or none at all. Only one in nine women born in 1938 never had children; for women born in 1967, that figure is one in four. The shift is most apparent among highly-educated women: some studies put the number of graduate women without children at one in three. This immediately flags up the issue of class: it's those with the highest earning power and biggest choice of careers who are opting not to have children. The "total fertility rate" fell from 2.9 children per woman in the mid-60s to just 1.6 in 2000, though it's risen a bit since then, to 1.97 in 2019.

SLOPPED

Alongside the fall in childbearing, marriage rates have declined. More than 90% of men born in 1930 had married by the age of 40 whereas only 63% of men born in 1970 had married by the same age. For women born in 1930, 94% had married by the age of 40 compared with 71% of those born in 1970. The proportion of the population cohabiting rose from 9.6% in 1990 to 17.3% in 2000. English couples with 46% of babies were born outside marriage in 2009, up from 39% in 1999. Seventy-four per cent of babies born to 20-24 year-old women, and 95% of babies born to under-20s were born outside marriage. These are overwhelmingly the children of working-class women, with low property — middle-class counterparts, and who do so earlier. Patterns of marriage have also shifted; and the shift has reinforced social inequality. According to a 2011 OECD report, "more people are marrying in the same earnings class." There is little left on the relationship between class and attitudes towards sex, relationships and marriage in the UK, but a big re- cent survey by US identified significant differences. Middle-class people who live together were more likely to see this as a step towards marriage, but "less-educated women dis- proportionately expressed concern that cohabitation would be a "trap", fearing it would be hard to exit things went wrong that it would lead to additional domestic re- sponsibilities but few bene- fits. "Working-class cohabitors were more apt to view marriage as "just a piece of paper". Paradoxically, the survey also showed that col- lege-educated people were both more likely to be mar- ried and more willing to break away from traditional ideas about what constitutes a "family" (for example, in relation to same-sex relationships). Although it might sound unromantic to describe mar- riage as a "property" relation- ship, property rights lie at the heart of marriage and are fundamental in the making of its role in capitalist society. Historically, for the prop- erty-owning classes, arranged marriages were all about making money.

MONEY

Though in most western societies today marriage is perceived to be primarily about commitment and romance (and despite Tony wishes to reintroduce no-fault divorce and tax incentives), it still has an impor- tant economic dimension. Marriage has long been advantageous for the lower-earning partner — but not for the higher, who has little about which to worry — and marriage adds status. Women have legal advantages for bourgeois women, who have more lucrative careers in order to bring up a family: it guaran- tees "female-headed" families key levels of financial security. This perhaps explains why the American college-educated women are more likely to tie the knot.

But if for many middle- class women marriage is a lifestyle choice, some work- ing-class women find their- selves being "married" into marriage-type relationships by law. The benefits the system forces (mainly) women to become financial strategists who will support one another for the remain- ing minute they begin a live-in sexual relationship. Better- off unmarried people can make their own choices about the extent to which they share their finances with live-in lovers, but for large numbers of working- class people there is no such option.

The case for social change rests on the extent to which policies are about to m ake marriage, marriage, the two-parentnuclear family, whether or not that family model would be the choice of the individuals in- volved. In doing so it con- tributes to a general ideological climate that says this is the best, most "nat- ural" way for human relation- ships to be. A huge commercial "wed- ding industry" has arisen from the media, backs up this ideology. It is central to pop- ular culture, think of the number of soap opera story- lines or popular movies that tell stories of romance and marriage, with the message that a woman who finds Mr Right and ensure he stays faithful to her. Couples are urged to get married at wedding ceremonies, with industry-run surveys of the "average wedding cost"企t- ing this at £35,000.

The acceptance of gay marriage by many conserva- tives makes the point that marriage is a conservative institution in its enshrine- ment of a one-to-one sexual relationship, as a mark of inden- tification of permanency. The reason why marriage is so important to capitalists is that it's a central mecha- nism through which marriage capitalist privatises and its devas- tating effectson women. The job of reproducing the labour force is "for free" within the family, rather than the costs being borne by society collectively.

Towards a sex neutral feminism?

While lesbian and gay feminism has been vitally important in the fight for equality, some have pointed out that it is, at its core, a romance-based feminism. For many, marriage and the all important institution of the nuclear family is central to the idea of true liberation. For others, the acceptance of gay marriage has meant that the foundations of the nuclear family are no longer as strongly in favour of the unification of sex work as well as the enshrinement of sex as separate. It is against this backdrop that we see the emergence of a new wave of feminism that seeks to challenge the traditional roles of gender and sexuality.
on graduate women’s pay than on the pay of lower-qualified women. Figures from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission report that though graduate women with two children can expect to be paid 4% less than graduate men of the same male equivalent, whereas for women with no qualifications the comparable pay gap is 58%.

In February this year, the work- ing-class women who are most likely to be pushed out of the waged workforce and into financial reliance on a partner and/or benefits. Notwithstanding the substantial effort on the part of government to ensure a particular model of sexual relationship, the trends seem to be further away from it.

The NATSAL survey is carried out every 10 years and is a major source of information about sexual behaviour. A new report is being completed now, so the figures available are preliminary at present. However, so they give an idea of the trends.

IDEAL

The ideal of monogamous marriage is a reality for very few people.

There is a large number of sexual partners in a lifetime is 12.7 for men and 6.5 for women, the median being 1 man and 4 women. These figures rose between 1990 and 2000 — and the rise was proportionally bigger for both men and women.

Almost 35% of men and 20% of women have more than 10 partners in a lifetime; the number of women with 10 or more partners doubled between 1990 and 2000 while the change for men was more modest.

Obviously there are discrepancies in these figures: some of this is likely to be over-reporting by men and under-reporting by women, although this may be an effect of the sex industry (a small proportion of women with large numbers of partners not properly reflected in the survey); some is an effect of the fact that women tend to form long-term relationships at an earlier age, and with somewhat older men.

But even if the increased figures are mainly a product of willingness to be honest in the survey, they do indicate a significant change in attitudes about women and men.

Unfortunately, the NATSAL survey has had some reflections in culture more widely.

The TV series “Sex and the City” was one prominent example of practitioners who sold sex to both men and women.

Again, even if the increased figures are mainly a product of greater self-assurance that itself reflects shifting attitudes. But of course, many of these are probably less to do with the state itself, and more to do with the work of the benefits system, which recognises only one partner at a time.

There is also evidence of generational change. For example, attitudes towards same-sex relationships vary with age. Younger people are far more likely to support gay marriage (71% of 18-29 year olds compared to 31% of over-46s), while younger people are much more likely to support legislation that would allow same-sex couples to marry, as almost all 18-29 years old are in favour of this, while only 36% of over-50 year old respondents are.

More recent surveys show a similar trend. The Labour Force Survey (2011) estimated that there were 3,000 families in the UK, including a same-sex couple and children, and this figure has increased rapidly. Some parents who are gay or lesbian claim that the benefit system is not reliable because of the sample size (and seem on the low side), but it is notable that in 2001 they were so small as not to be reported at all.

SAME-SEX

Same-sex couples’ parenting arrangements are in a state of flux, the new report show the variety of family types that people choose when they are not following the biological parenthood and sexual relationships is broken.

Some children are brought up by same-sex couples, even though these individuals are not in a sexual relationship with one another. Others are brought up by one biological parent and her/his sexual partner.

Some couples have an arrangement with the biological parent of their child similar to the typical arrangements of divorced heterosexual parents. These families show that it is perfectly possible to raise children outside the norms of a traditional marriage-type relationship.

But, once again, class differences are apparent. For example, in access to IVF treatment and legal advice for same-sex couples wanting to have a child, and although this is not illegal, is still experienced by same-sex couples trying to adopt children or register with IVF services on the NHS.

We must also remember the number of “consensual” sexual relationships evident in the NATSAL surveys, which is one of the major limitations of these data.

The biggest shift in the past 50 years has been substantial shifts both in attitudes towards sex and sexuality and in the male/female position of women.

The two are related: as women enjoy greater financial independence they are more able to assert their own interests in their private lives. But the fact remains that for many women — and more particularly for working-class women — that financial independence disappears as soon as they decide to have children.

A substantial part of their life, they become financially reliant on a partner. The great deal of pressure — whether subtly through media manipulation or overtly through a constant benefits system — to comply with the image of the size of their career that’s most convenient for capitalism.

The sexual politics of Fifty Shades should be judged on how much it tips the balance towards being more widely, just because its content is sexual.
**Matchwomen struck a light**

**By Louise Raw**

The right-wing press can’t decide whether to portray Frances O’Grady, the next General Secretary of the TUC, as a clichéd feminist or little lady drowning in a cloud of testosterone.

The TUC, which has not updated its sexist “innate gender stereotypes” in 40 years and hilariously误run the country, wonders how she’ll cope with short men with “dog-on-a- rope” dispositions. It deduces that, as Deputy for some years, she must have somehow learned not to swoon when confronted with such “hairy areas.”

Leaving aside breathtakingly factitious questioning of modern working women’s virtues and the common inner circle of male trades unionism, it’s too soon to see such ancient canards served up as fresh.

Half of all members are female, and from grass roots to NEC unions draw on talent and commitment from both sexes.

However, women in the movement will tell you that aggressively macho tactics still abound, too and not always reserved for employers. Dinosaur bosses still roam the landscape, perversely on the verge of extinction, but still dangerous.

We need to know and celebrate the movement’s rich and extra-ordinary heritage. It contains enough fascinating stories to fill the history strands of all TV channels several times over, but you wouldn’t know it.

In particular, the truth about women’s matchmen in the story has been buried. This deprives today’s women activists of role models and inspiration.

Men and women in the movement have fought exploitation side by side for centuries, but there have also been periods of hostility between women and the labour movement.

The events of the 19th cen- tury, in particular, cast a long shadow.

As new capitalist factory owners gained social power, they could make their own rules, and de- cide to stand, as a class, for the nobility of the cloth, against the aristocratic view that no gentleman worker worked for a living.

But they rather fancied gentility: in fact, the gentry’s concept of the lady of leisure, and made it their own. No way.

If a woman should work, they proclaimed, when biology and theology decreed her place to be in the home. The great irony was that these same men had made the same fortunes from women’s labour, the back- bone of industrialisation. Women always had and always would work, but now it suited polite society to pretend otherwise.

Working-class men knew they couldn’t survive without wives and daughters’ wages, but still the “broad-minded” myth insisted men provided for everyone.

Some unions did recruit women, and Chartists were not the only political movement to give them prominence. But when push came to shove, because the movement hadn’t adopted a positive overall stance on women, it was easy for men to see women workers as a threat.

One union’s records show members understood that the “widowhood” of employers paying women less “made poor women lazy and kept poor men from still voting to fight their union.”

In Kidderminster in 1875, when a carpet firm hired lower-paid women to force men into a pay-cut, threatening letters warned the women “they might very likely get their brains knocked out.”

The same year, the TUC’s Henry Brookdell declared that the men must always return women “to their proper sphere at home.”

With friends like Brook- dell, working women didn’t need enemies – and, in any case, had their employ- er’s back.

One great Victorian suc- cess story was Bryant & May matches, who em- ployed thousands of women and girls.

They banned unions, and defied the law. Health and safety violations had ghastly results.

Because the white phos- phorus the firm preferred was too deadly, workers were supposed to have a dining area away from the workshops. But they didn’t, deadly parti- cles settled on food, giving the poison a direct route into the mouth.

JAW

Full-blown phosphorus poisoning, “phosgy jaw,” led to slow decay of facial bones and agonising death.

The “respectable” union movement didn’t approve of women like the match- workers: but they struck action anyway, forcing their employers to ac- cede to their terms and recognise the first large female union in the country in 1875.

They were by no means the first women to fight for what they deserved before women spinners in Leices- tershire had their own mili- tant union. Elsewhere, we read of women40000 striking breakwater strikers under water pumps.

Throughout history women have fought back with courage, in and out of the workplace.

From the young married woman who fought solitary hunger strikes in 1910, won in 1910, women’s struggle is everywhere. But you have to know where to find it, and have the luxury of time to spend in archives. This movement has done the left no good.

Joan, more than a century after the match- makers started “New Unionism,” the last attempt of modern unionism, the TUC has too re-launch it, as a re- cruitment campaign aimed at women, part-time and unpaid workers.

It took Thatcher’s de- struction of the country’s manufacturing base and the resulting loss of seven million union members to form.

So why is women’s part in history and political heritage not writ- ten, and celebrated, every- where?

Frances O’Grady hinted at the answer, speaking to the Labour Party’s women’s “manifest- cut cuts” impact.

You’re too forgiven for thinking that this was part of a back-to-the-kitchen sink campaign: but women are being hit hardest by job losses, service cuts, threats to take away employment rights, pay depression, ris- ing bills and lack of child- care... You could be forgiven for thinking that there is one.

It is precisely because working women are struggling on so many fronts for so long that they have not always had time to record and celebrate their victo- ries.

We need to work on uncovering and publicising our past as part of building a better future. Then, the establishment would no longer have power, and empowerment of women would be an authentic “boys’ club”.

O’Grady will be speaking next year at the feminist celebration to mark the 150th anniver- sary of the match workers: a strong appeal to remember the em- powerment with this history. She told us Mikey has “al- ways been inspired by those teenage rebels” the matchwomen. I hope that, as she takes up a unique combination of dream job and poisoned chalice, the spirit of women like them will live on.

Louise Raw is the au- thor of Striking a Light: the Bryant & May Strike of 1881 (Continuum Press), and Di- rector of the forthcoming Matchwomen’s Festival, Saturday 6 July 2013.

**By Emma Rickman**

Female weightlifting champion Zoe Smith at this year’s Olympics responded to sexist Twitter comments: “We do not exist to prove something... it’s not what makes them think that we even want them to find us attractive.”

Sport can enable women to confront sexist objectification in a very direct way; by stating very forcefully that our bodies are our own, our identity, and their purpose is not the sexual gratification of men.

Some sports lend themselves to sexist vilification, for the same reason that women workers get the rough end of workplace sexism: they step outside society’s concern that what is appropriate for “the female body.”

Football, weightlifting and wrestling are examples of sports where women face discrimination for being “mas- culine,” ie, focussed on the sport, competitive, strong and confident.

My favourite memory on women in the Olympics came from Andrew Bown of the Daily Telegraph, whose artic- le on the women’s judo was entitled “It’s distressing to watch these girls beat each other up.”

Conservatives express what wider society still implicitly feels: women are not as physically capable as men, their capacity to feel pain, suffering is not the same as men’s, and so women’s sport is a second-class standard to men’s. Women just aren’t fit.

Combined with this is an unhealthy level of body-con- sciousness which drives women, and men, to diet, or to do exercises which will never be, and are just, closed, air-conditioned gyms. The goal is to gain the magnificent body, not enjoyment of exercise or sport for itself.

Conservative feminist Zoe Williams describes the sexual at- traction audiences feel for athletes as a different mindset altogether: “watching them bash each other up... their bodies are ours, part of our identity, and their purpose is cle

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