Women’s Fightback

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www.workersliberty.org/women

Fight to save the NHS!

By Jane Kerr

Since the start of the year hundreds of thousands of people have mobilised around the country to save the NHS.

• On 16 March 5,000 people marched through the streets of Islington to stop cuts — loss of 230 beds and 570 jobs — at the Whittington Hospital.

• On the same day hundreds of protesters gathered outside Lewisham Hospital to oppose the downgrading of the emergency and maternity services — cuts that threaten the long-term future of the hospital.

• On 26 January 25,000 people marched through Lewisham. That did not stop Tory Health Minister Jeremy Hunt from approving the plan to downgrade the hospital.

• In Leeds more than 600,000 people have signed a petition to defend the children’s heart surgery unit.

The government plans to replace the obstetrician-led maternity service at Lewisham Hospital with a stand-alone birth centre.

A birth centre is a unit for women with so-called low-risk pregnancies (an estimated 10 per cent of all births). There will no longer be facilities at the hospital for emergency situations — no theatres, no critical care for babies.

And Lewisham has a high proportion of high-risk births.

In the event of an emergency mothers and babies will have to be rushed in an ambulance to another hospital, miles down the road, to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Woolwich.

The government’s rhetoric of choice, either on choices for pregnant women or for everyone else using the health service, is a lie.

More to the point, none of these changes were made by consulting people in Lewisham. They were made so that the government could bail out the South London Healthcare Trust’s debt to a big business PFI scheme.

Stop these cuts!

Save Lewisham Hospital campaign
savelewishamhospital.com

Defend maternity services in Lewisham

The government announced plans to sneak through regulations to the Health and Social Care Act that will mean the privatisation of the NHS. 200,000 people signed a protest petition in days. The Government are now back with the same sort of plans, and so the campaign continues.

Together these local mobilisations could be the beginning of a mass movement. As that movement begins to take shape we will begin to work out what sort of health service we need.

Defend the Whittington Hospital Coalition — dwhc.org.uk

Defend London’s NHS — demonstration

• Save our hospitals
• No to privatisation

Saturday 18 May
Assemble: 12 noon, Jubilee Gardens, Belvedere Road, SE1
defendlondonslhs.wordpress.com

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Lobby of the House of Lords against NHS privatisation, 26 March. Photo: Philippa Whitecross

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Rape jokes: it’s not that simple

By Matt Reuben

Rape jokes are generally considered, within the (at least) feminist and/or women-focused movement to be bad.

This is perhaps something decent people tell. They reinforce the stereotype that some man or woman is the “other”, not being “normal” or deserving of respect. They are deprecating mockery of women’s bodies and their experiences of rape. This is not to say that rape jokes can never be acceptable, but their intent matters.

I realise how damaging rape jokes are, even on a personal level, when unexplained. From personal experience, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’s complexity and imagery can be so severe that rape jokes can leave me shaken and terrified to leave the house. I can leave me Feeling like a recovering rape victim, I’m sitting with someone who I know is a potential rapist and I have to keep myself as safe as possible.

When I watch television, or check Facebook, or hear friends making remarks like this, it can be petrifying, and I’ve read the statistics on the 35 per cent of college-age men who would commit rape under certain circumstances if they thought they could get away with it, or the 8.3 per cent who have actually done so.

Rape jokes are also a form of dehumanization. They can be a form of dehumanization. They can be a form of dehumanization. They can be a form of dehumanization.

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Million Women Rise: challenging male violence

By Jo ann Trevor

Million Women Rise (MWR) organises an annual, women-only, march in the North End, London to coincide with International Women’s Day, with the slogan: “Together we can end male violence against women and girls”. Migrant and BME women play a prominent role. The first march was in 2008, the sixth march in 2013 attracted around 1,000, down on previous years.

Explaining why the march is for women only, MWR says: “Women have been socially, culturally and economically conditioned to defer to men, to take out in partners, to behave in ways approved of by men. On the march, women can want women to come and feel the strength, the exhibition and power of being with other women, to celebrate ourselves, to sing, to shout and chant at the top of our voices, in all our diversity, to demonstrate however we want because we’re women in the company of other women.”

MWR was founded by Sabrina Qureshi, a worker with the Women and Girls Network (WGN), a counselling service for women victims of male violence. Qureshi says: “We may not have the physical presence of a million women on the march, but the name represents the millions of women who are with us in spirit or who want to be with us but can’t.”

MWR believes that education is key and is involved in campaigns to get all forms of media to cover their work.

• Million Women Rise demonstration 2013

Million Women Rise: challenging male violence

Sexual violence: some statistics

In January 2013, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Home Office released the first ever joint report on sexual statistics. It had beeninium on sexual violence in England and Wales. Based on data from the Crime Survey for three years over two years to 2012.

• An average of 2.5 per cent of females and 0.4 per cent of males said they had been a victim of a sexual offence (including attempts). That is 404,000 females and 72,000 males.

• Around 85,000 females and 12,000 men report being the victim of rape or sexual assault by penetration.

• Around one in 20 females aged 16 to 59 reported being a victim of a serious sexual offence since the age of 16.

• Around 90 per cent of victims knew the perpetrator.

• Only 15 per cent of female victims of the most serious offences had reported the incident to the police.

• In 2011-12 the police recorded a total of 53,700 sexual offences across England and Wales. The most serious offences of rape and sexual assault accounted for 71 per cent of the total.

• The detection rate of 30 per cent for sexual offences was higher than for some other offences, such as robbery (22 per cent) and theft (13 per cent), it was lower than for other contact crimes such as violence against the person (44 per cent).

• In 2011-12 9,900 defendants were prosecuted in court. Of those cases about 30 per cent were for rapes. Of all offenders that completed to the point of guilty or acquittal at the magistrates’ court or Crown Court just under two thirds were convicted.

• In 2011 the 2,900 defendants prosecuted for rape were prosecuted, on average, for 2.3 rape offences each.

• The number of sexual offences against girls aged 13 and under has remained static.

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Migrant women workers organising

Around the globe, migrant women’s labour plays an important role in developing capitalism. Vicki Morris explores some of the issues this raises for socialist feminists. While some comments as we are developing a workshop around the topic — email wfightback@workerslib.org

Women make up around half of migrant workers and contribute significantly to work in all fields. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that there are currently around 90 million migrant workers worldwide, 48% of whom are women. Migrant workers do not have any legal status. Migration can be within country, involving moving from the countryside to town, moving to another region, or moving to another country. For the women involved in migration usually involves stress, hardship and sometimes danger, and, for the time that they are away, often, loneliness and mistreated feelings about leaving loved ones behind.

What drives a woman to migrate? The drivers can be a mixture of positive — seeking better opportunities, more money — and negative — to escape oppression and repressive circumstances, including, mainly, poverty. Most women have little choice but to return home to help their families, children in particular.

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LEGAL STATUS

A migrant’s immigration status is crucial in shaping their experience.

If people do not have the legal right to be in the country or to work they are vulnerable to extreme exploitation. Employers take advantage of the fear of being discovered by authorities and expelled from the country to force them to put up with long hours, low pay below the legal minimum, poor health and safety conditions, and sometimes violence and humiliation at work.

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How can these women organise to defend their rights as workers — and as women? The particular challenges they must overcome, with the help of allies in the women’s and labour movements include:

• Finding ways to connect and organise.
• Assisting women to find a place in society, including in the labour movement. This might involve offering training, advice on rights, language lessons, etc.
• Fighting racism, nationalism and immigration controls.
• Learning from migrants. Many migrants bring prior political and trade union experience, and many exhibit the shear combative, that we need to help revive the British labour movement.

CHALLENGES

Socialists want to change the world and believe that RMT cleaners, London, 2012

the working class — in all its diversity — is the social force to do it.

Migrant women workers occupy particular positions within capitalism and the role they can play in changing the world will be shaped by that, but they certainly will be part of socialist and feminist change. Socialist feminists need to rise to the particular challenges they must overcome.

Even when women do have the right to stay and work in a country, they tend to find themselves in lower paid jobs with fewer employment rights.

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Migrant women workers organise

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— to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our job as reorienting the labour movement towards a fight for women’s rights, and the women’s movement towards class struggle.

Without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women’s oppression. Without a mass movement of organized, mobilized women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution. Neither is possible without the other.

Women’s Fightback believes socialists and feminists need to transform the labour movement in order to make it fit to fight for socialism, and even to win basic, broad-and-butter battles over issues such as pay. Migrant women workers stand to gain particularly from a more combative trade union movement since they are often in the lowest tiers of the workplace. Trade unions need to meet the challenge of helping all migrant and women workers to organise against exploitative employers. In their turn, migrant women workers’ struggles can inspire us and remind us of the origins of the labour movement.

Most labour movements were built as people — migrants — displaced from the countryside moved to live in towns and entered the early industrial, capitalist economy. Differences of time and place are very important and each situation must be assessed concretely. But the key tasks are the same everywhere and at all times: to organise the unorganised, to build solidarity between workers, to fight for a common goal of socialism that will end exploitation forever.

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