



Women of the world: step up the fight for socialism

The Committee for a Workers' International - with parties, sections and members in 35 countries in all five continents - greets the working women of the world for International Women's Day, 2001. Since the end of the 19th Century, March 8 has been the day on which to commemorate the struggles, the victories, the heroine leaders and the martyrs who have fought to better the lot of women in society.

Traditionally, we honour the great socialist pioneers and revolutionaries such as Eleanor Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin. We salute also the work of nameless thousands around the globe who have organised working and poor women to fight back against oppression.

On this day also, we remember with great anger the countless millions of women worldwide who are driven from their homes by wars, violence and sheer poverty. Our hearts go out to the women who languish in jails as political prisoners or as mere victims of the unjust system of capitalism itself. All this makes us doubly determined to step up the fight for socialism.

Members of our International have themselves pioneered campaigns against sexual harassment and domestic violence. They have been instrumental in bringing these issues into the open and involving trade unions, youth organisations and other campaigning groups in fighting to protect the women most afflicted.

March 8 is the day when international solidarity between working women of all countries is celebrated. The CWI greets women wherever they labour and wherever they struggle - in factories, shops, markets and offices, in hospitals, schools and neighbourhoods, in transport, mining and fishing, in farming, harvesting and picking and in sport and entertainment. Women are workers and people, not servants and sex objects. We urge them to challenge every

prejudice and stereotype that insults them and to organise together for a fight back.

All the parties and national sections of the Committee for a Workers' International actively participate in, and often initiate, campaigns on issues that directly affect women - low pay, reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment and cuts in spending on public services. In many countries, a large proportion of our members are women and in one or two, they constitute more than half the membership. In every country where we are active, we strive to win young and working class women to the ideas of socialism and to our International.

The CWI believes that the liberation of women from the double oppression they bear will be won, not through moralising or fighting against men but through collective joint action against the bosses, the land-owners and capitalism. Working class men, under capitalism, are also labouring to make other people's profits and they suffer their own humiliations and degradations as well. A united struggle of all the oppressed - men and women of all nations - is the way forward.

Young Women Fight

The Committee for a Workers' International welcomes the involvement of more and more young women at school, college and university in protest movements. They are fighting attacks on education, against racism and discrimination and other forms of injustice. Through campaigns, we encourage them to see that the 'evils' of modern-day society stem from class domination and are assisted by the upholders of 'tradition' and propagators of religious propaganda.

As CWI members in Nigeria point out in an article for their paper - Socialist Democracy - "The root cause of women's oppression is capitalism" but "Religion ... discourages women's participation in politics". The Islamic doctrine, they explain, says that women should not be seen or heard in

public, let alone be involved in politics. Christianity says women must be totally submissive to their husbands. Luckily, these dictates are being increasingly defied by women – especially young women – in countries where it can still mean ostracism by your family and physical attack on the streets.

Another welcome development is the participation, in large numbers, of young women in the recent wave of international protests at summit meetings. Whether it be in Seattle or Washington, Prague, Melbourne, Nice or Porto Allegre they have been raising their voices against institutions like the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and the European Union. They cannot stand by and see these rich men's clubs sew up the world economy in the interests of the most industrialised nations and of the giant multinational corporations. They are adamant that the world's poor should have a better deal.

Young women will undoubtedly again be out in force on the anti-capitalist demonstrations planned for Quebec, Barcelona, Gothenburg, Genoa, Brussels and other cities hosting conferences of the rich and powerful this year. The CWI will be intervening in these events with our banners and pamphlets, leaflets and slogans, arguing our socialist case. We will, as always, be aiming to convince combative and thinking men and women that their place is with us in the CWI - an international party of struggle, solidarity and socialism.

Women and the World

Last year, members of our International in a number of different countries took part in the 'World March of Women'. This event (or series of events) was organised by an assortment of Non-Government Organisations, church associations, human rights organisations and other mainly middle class women 'do-gooders'. Their elaborate programme of liberal demands amounted to calling for the impossible - for capitalism to be fair and equitable!

Nevertheless, it was clear that these large, colourful and noisy demonstrations gave vent to a huge discontent building up amongst women. Railing against a

worldwide system that grows fat on exploitation and misery, they will not be content with the promises of politicians and trade union leaders who defend capitalism.

A United Nations Human Development report warned more than five years ago that "The burden of the adjustment cost associated with trade liberalisation, whether in terms of higher import cost or lower export prices, will have a tremendous effect on women's social burden. When governments re-distribute economic resources from the trade sector, or give tax advantages or receive less revenue from the elimination of tariffs etc., it is usually the social services that are sacrificed.... It is assumed that women will extend greater efforts to provide water and food for their families, to nurse the sick who cannot find reasonable health care and take care of the children who have day care facilities".

Already in 1993, the report continues, women contributed over \$11 trillion worth of household work to the world economy. "This is in addition to their contribution to subsistence agriculture, informal activities and sub-contracting for multinational corporations...In both developed and developing countries, about two-thirds of women's work goes unrecorded, compared to only one-third of men's". Since then, the situation will undoubtedly have worsened gravely and the future looks anything but rosy!

International Women's Day 2001 is celebrated at a time of great anxiety and uncertainty. As the giant economy of the United States goes into a downturn, the whole world teeters on the edge of a recession. The rich fear for their profits and the value of their assets, workers for their jobs and their children's future. The poorest of the world, the majority of them women, are already racked by the daily struggle for survival. They will have little idea that the odds, already stacked so cruelly against them, can get still worse, as international capitalism hits its crisis.

Most of the 1.2 billion people, with incomes of less than \$1 a day, have little contact with the world beyond their immediate environment. They will not have telephones (let alone access to the Internet) nor any

chance to travel further than a few miles. They must manage all their domestic tasks without electricity and running water. For them, watching someone's TV or listening to a radio is a rare luxury.

Victories and Progress

Socialists everywhere take heart, however, at the quickening pace of revolt and struggle experienced in many parts of the world. Women have been to the fore in many recent battles on a national and local scale - from the bank-workers of Seoul, Korea to the council workers of London; from the textile workers of the Mexican Maquiladoras to the shoemakers of Portugal. In Rouen, Northern France, where CWI members were very much involved, the role of women fighting in support of the striking bus-drivers was a key element in finally winning a victory.

Everywhere, women have been suffering most severely from the onslaught of privatisation's and the widespread cutbacks in public services. They have been amongst the fiercest campaigners in battles to keep open threatened hospitals, schools, nurseries and other community facilities. International solidarity organised by the CWI has boosted the struggles of women like the 'term-time' workers of Northern Ireland and the Aldi shop-workers in the South of Ireland. Significant victories have been won by community struggles led by our members over issues related to local taxation and charges for services, over housing, toxic waste dumps, flooding and so on.

The lives of literally hundreds of millions of women and their children could be transformed by recent advances in scientific research - from anti-Aids drugs to new methods of assisting with fertility and contraception. But capitalism, geared as it is to profit and not to people, puts these latest gains far beyond the reach of the majority of the women who most urgently need them.

It remains a scandal beyond belief that one man – Bill Gates – can 'earn' more than the total sum needed, according to the United Nations, to guarantee fresh water, adequate food, shelter, medicines and a basic education to the hundreds of millions of people forced to go without. Again, those

who suffer most from the lack of these most basic necessities are women.

The bulk of the world's illiterate people are also women, yet recent surveys have confirmed that young women can develop intellectually faster than boys and men. When they have the same opportunities to study and to follow careers that require skill and intelligence, they can out-perform them. But most women do not have such opportunities.

Nowhere are educational and career opportunities for girls from poor and working class back-grounds equal to those for girls from other classes. Nowhere, because of the prevailing values in capitalist society, do they ever really equal those for boys and men.

A recent decision of the International Court in The Hague has been trumpeted as another major breakthrough for women. For the first time ever, rape has been categorised as a war crime and a crime against humanity. But that is of little or no comfort to the tens of thousands of women (as well as young men and children) who have been tortured and raped by soldiers in conflicts around the world. This has happened, and is still happening, not only in ex-Yugoslavia but also in Chechnya, in West Africa and in a whole number of countries where the horrors of war go on largely unreported in the world's press.

We have seen, at the same time, new laws adopted in European countries which virtually criminalise people who are fleeing hunger, wars and persecution in their own countries. Many are treated like cattle by the gangsters who control their escape. Many are lucky simply to survive the journeys they make. Then comes the humiliation of being treated as an outcast and branded as a scrounger. Detention, deportation, even death can be the final outcome. The majority of refugees in the world and also of asylum-seekers, are women and their children.

Women and children as commodities

In the squalid life of refugee camps and shantytowns worldwide, women become easy prey to traffickers in human beings. In many cases, women 'helped' from their

home country to a supposedly more 'advanced' society, find themselves imprisoned within the ever-burgeoning sex 'industry'. The hypocrisy of the authorities' attitudes towards this nightmare was demonstrated recently in London when police organised a massive police raid in the 'red light' district of SOHO. One of their purposes, they explained, was to rescue such women being forced to work in brothels. However, when they found anyone without official papers, they were summarily deported – out of the frying pan back into the fire!

In Eastern Europe, as well as Asia and elsewhere, prostitution has been seen as the only way to avoid total impoverishment. It has become a way of life for tens of thousands of women literally thrown onto the streets by the de-industrialisation and cuts that have followed the re-establishment of capitalism in their countries.

Campaigns against the exploitation of women's bodies – against sexism and prostitution - like the one developed by CWI members in Sweden over the past few years, have been extremely effective. But when the primary source of exploitation lies in the class division of society and when the capitalist system itself is experiencing economic and social decay and collapse, the problem reaches nightmare proportions.

Poverty and demoralisation have reached such depths in Russia, now, that not only women but children, too, are being exported for cash. Men and women are finding it harder and harder to cover the costs of bringing up children. They are choosing to have fewer and to adopt fewer and, as an article in the Manchester Guardian (24 February '01) revealed, there has been a doubling in three years of the number of abandoned children in Russia to a horrific 650,000.

Nearly a quarter of a million children - 230,000 - are kept in the country's crumbling state orphanage system. "The conditions are so wretched that 90% of the children require psychiatric treatment within four years". In this situation, thousands of Russian children are being flown out for adoption in the USA and elsewhere. The number going to Italy has quadrupled in the last three years.

Sometimes the process is legal and above board; other times not. The writers of the Guardian article had come across a scam for selling Russian children to Italian parents at about \$2,500 a child.

This is just one of a legion of horror stories coming out of Russia at the present time. While the CWI believed that what existed there until the break-up of the Soviet Union just ten years ago, was a monstrous deformation of a socialist state, we predicted that abandoning the plan and state ownership for the 'market' would bring untold misery. These stories only add urgency to the task of struggling for a genuine socialist alternative to capitalism.

Revolution

We have seen in recent months, even before a world recession bites, that the wind of struggle and of revolution is gathering once more. Following hot on the heels of the Serbian revolution against Milosevic, came the downfall in January of the corrupt Philippine president, Estrada. On the streets for days on end, in the noisy and colourful demonstrations that forced him out of office were hundreds of thousands of women - young women and working women. Unfortunately, the fact that a woman - Gloria Macapagal Arroyo - has succeeded Joseph Estrada as president, will not make a big difference to their lives. Coming from the country's aristocratic and property owning elite, she will not carry through the measures necessary to fulfil her promises of eliminating poverty and injustice.

Working class and peasant women throughout the world deserve a better deal. The basis for fulfilling their needs and aspirations can only be laid by the kind of political, economic and social transformation wrought by the October Revolution in Russia, back in the second decade of the last century. This means the elimination of all remnants of feudalism and of big capitalist business. It means their replacement by public ownership of land, industry and finance and genuine democratic control over the running of society, the economy and the state.

Councils of elected representatives of the poor and working people in the towns and in

the countryside would do a far better job than today's political poodles and bungling bureaucrats who try faithfully to serve the men of property. With working women at last represented by their own kind in such decision-making bodies, a system of workers' and peasants' government would organise industry, agriculture, education and social services not for carrying out the wishes of the men and women of property but according to what people need and people want.

Working women, your quarrel is with the bosses, the landlords and their rotten system and not the men of your own class – be it your brothers, lovers, sons or friends.

Their enemy is your enemy.

Fight together for a socialist world.

**CWI
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