

Committee for a Workers' International (CWI)

Women against War and Capitalism International Women's Day 2004



The day of international working women's solidarity - 8 March - is celebrated this year just days before the first anniversary of imperialism's attack on Iraq. A relatively short "war" pursued against the background of mass opposition world-wide has given way to a "peace" shaken daily by new clashes, as occupying forces and collaborating Iraqis come under fire.

Bush and Blair are no nearer to securing their real war aim of control over the second biggest oil reserves in the world. Nor are they any nearer establishing a stable, democratic government in Iraq, which they promised. The hollowness of their propaganda is exposed, including the lies about weapons of mass destruction.

Millions of lives have already been wrecked in

Iraq by the violent conflict, wars, tyranny and economic sanctions inflicted on the country's people. As in every war-torn and poverty-stricken country, women and children constitute the majority of displaced and hungry people. In the chaos that reigns, there is the nightmare of children being kidnapped and tortured. As the occupiers and the "representatives" of the Iraqi people they have appointed wrangle over an interim government, women's rights have become an issue but are likely to become a victim of the search for peace on their terms.

Protests

The demonstrations around the world on 20 March demanding an end to the military occupation of Iraq, will certainly see a large participation of women - young and old. Last year, on 15 February, when 35 million people globally

joined the anti-war protests, and on 'Day X' (20 March), women were often the most angry and vocal on the demonstrations.

In London on 'Day X', for example, thousands of young women walked out of their schools and marched on the Houses of Parliament. Serried ranks of female students from schools in Tower Hamlets, wearing their Muslim headscarves, surged across Westminster Bridge, vehemently shouting their anti Bush and Blair slogans and queuing up to sign petitions and buy the 'Socialist' - the paper of the CWI's section in England and Wales.

In Germany, where hundreds of thousands of school students took to the streets on 'Day X', (200,000 of them mobilised by SAV - the German section of the CWI) at least half were female. In Sweden, where CWI members established Youth Against the War, in Australia, in Italy and elsewhere, young women were to the fore in leading school strikes and organising the protests.

Women on strike

Also in the past year, women workers have played an important role in the new wave of industrial struggles breaking out across Europe, especially in the public sector - teachers, nurses, local authority workers and civil servants. In the USA, amongst the 70,000 shop-workers in California who have been on strike for more than three months, women are prominent. In every country, a majority of the most exploited layers of workers are women. Millions will have participated in the important general strikes of the past year - in India, in Chile, in Nigeria.

Yet the majority of women, especially in the neo-colonial world, remain unorganised in unions and feel doomed to a life of unending toil - at the workplace, in the fields and in the home. They constitute more than two thirds of the world's illiterate and poor, and, on average receive around two thirds of men's income. In Africa, they do 90% of the mainly agricultural work and receive almost no actual pay. In most neo-colonial countries, even in industry, women receive no more than 50% of men's wages.



The Committee for a Workers' International made an important intervention at this year's World Social Forum. Held in Mumbai, India, it was somewhat of a 'junket' and parade for the leaders of Non Government Organisations and famous speakers who can describe the poverty and oppression of the region but, limiting themselves to working within the capitalist system, offer no solutions.

Sri Lanka, has the highest rating in South Asia in the United Nations' Human Development Index and a recent Asian Development Bank report says that "The economic and social status of Sri Lankan women is relatively better than in many other developing countries". But, it continues, "Women are the most disadvantaged in the labour market, concentrated in low-paying, semi-skilled, labour-intensive jobs (often in the Middle East), and subject to long hours, poor wages, job insecurity, subordinate positions, few promotion opportunities and inequitable gender division of labour...Remittances from tea and garment exports depend largely on women...the quality

of social services is often poor. Moreover, inadequate calorie intake in low income families causes wasting among under 5s and maternal under-nutrition, the latter triggering a fairly high incidence of low birth-weight babies".

The situation in the North and East of the island, devastated by nearly 20 years of civil war, is even worse. There are 30,000 war widows and 300,000 displaced children. Infant and maternal mortality rates are twice or three times higher than the average for the island and school drop-out rates four times higher. Sanitation facilities and the availability of clean water are chronically inadequate.

Yet the Women's Affairs Ministry can smugly announce the gala festivities being laid on to celebrate International Women's Day this year. Apparently, since Sri Lanka signed the United Nations Women's Charter in 1983, it has always celebrated this day. This will be of little comfort to the tens of thousands of women toiling on the tea plantations or in the textile factories of the Free Trade Zones largely without the protection of trade union organisations.

In Afghanistan, as Amnesty International wryly points out, the new Transitional Administration ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women in 2003. Yet, as the January/February issue of their journal, Amnesty, points out:

"The majority of girls and women in detention in Afghanistan have harmed no one. They are accused or convicted of ...adultery, engaging in consensual sex before marriage or running away from home.

"AI interviewed more than 40 women and girls in prisons in Kabul, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif. Most ...said they had either been forced into marriage or sold by their families at an early age. Many said they had subsequently become victims of sexual or physical abuse. Others had sought to marry a spouse of their choice in preference to a forced marriage. Other women and girls are fleeing violence in the home from family members.

"In such cases, the state is apparently punishing victims of violence whom it has failed to

protect. Afghan law forbids forced and underage marriages, but neither society nor the criminal justice system treat these as criminal offences. Prosecution for crimes of violence against women, including rape and domestic violence, is extremely rare...

"...In some regions...cases are not reported to the police, but are dealt with in the family - by killing the woman involved...Seeking external assistance could (also) result in death 'because it is the Pashtun Wali tradition and because it is a big shame if a woman brings her problems outside the home'".

In India, at the World Social Forum itself, a garment union official described to a CWI organiser the vast task of improving the lot of women in industry there.

"The union was formed in 1996 and has 25,000 members today. 97 per cent of the members are women, as are all except one members in the leadership... 'Women workers from the rural areas are recruited to the garment industry in fast growing cities like Bangalore. Here they are extremely exploited by the employers. Most live in rooms of 15 x 20 feet with up to five other workers. The wages are 700-2,500 rupees per month (€30 average).

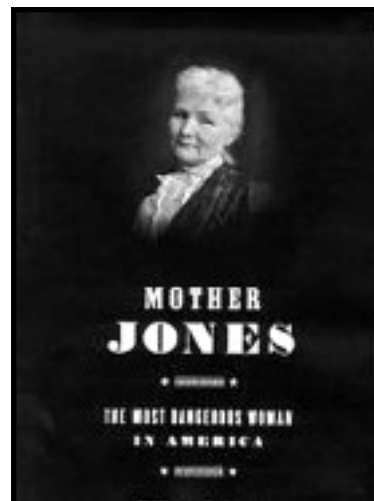
"On top of the bad conditions and the low wages, the workers are subject to sexual harassment at work, from supervisors and management. Women workers are regarded as of less value than male workers. They have almost no education and their own families don't want them back after moving from home. After five years of work, they should be given 15 days extra wage. But the employers even get around this, by sacking them just before the five years have passed. This makes union work even more difficult...

(In a particular struggle last October, which was a success), "Dudiyora Horaata (the CWI in India) offered us support during the strike, and they were the only political organisation that organised solidarity action for us."

... "In the local elections, in three years time, we are planning to stand seventy GWU candidates, all women. Our programme is for a minimum living wage, gender equality, and to

Elliott J.Gorn, author of *'Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America'*, wrote an article to explain why an anti-establishment magazine in the US is called 'Mother Jones'. Extracts below, give a glimpse of the half forgotten life story of this extraordinary woman.

"Upton Sinclair ...chronicled the bloody Colorado coal strike of 1913-14: 'There broke out a storm of applause which swelled into a tumult as a little woman came forward on the platform. She was wrinkled and old, dressed in black, looking like somebody's grandmother; she was, in truth, the grandmother of hundreds of thousands of miners.' 'All over the country she had roamed,' Sinclair concluded, 'and wherever she went, the flame of protest had leaped up in the hearts of men; her story was a veritable Odyssey of revolt.'



"Articles about her regularly appeared in magazines and newspapers, and for many working Americans, she had achieved legendary, even iconic, status. Yet the woman for whom Mother Jones magazine is named is scarcely known any longer. Some might ...recall her famous war cry: 'Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living.' But few remember much about Mother Jones, who battled corporate presidents and politicians, who went to jail repeatedly for organizing workers, and who converted tens of thousands of Americans to the labor movement and the left. ...With dramatic speeches and street theater, she organized workers, women, and minorities, drawing public attention to their hardships and giving them a voice...

"As the new 20th century approached, Mary Jones was an aging, poor, widowed Irish immigrant, nearly as dispossessed as an American could be... Most American women of that era led quiet, homebound lives devoted to their families. Women, especially elderly ones, were not supposed to have opinions; if they had them, they were not to voice them publicly – and certainly not in the fiery tones of a street orator.

"Yet by casting herself as the mother of downtrodden people everywhere, Mary Jones went where she pleased, spoke out on the great issues of her day, and did so with sharp irreverence... For a quarter of a century, she roamed America...She was paid a stipend by the United Mine Workers and, for a few years, by the Socialist Party. But she always felt free to work in whatever cause most needed her – striking garment workers in Chicago, bottle washers in Milwaukee breweries, Pittsburgh steelworkers, El Paso streetcar operators, Calumet copper miners. She helped workers fight not just low pay, 12-hour days, and horrifying mortality rates, but also the servitude of company stores and company housing. She also spoke out in defense of IWW leaders on trial for murder in Boise (she was one of the original signers of the Industrial Workers of the World charter), labor activists imprisoned in California, and Mexican revolutionaries in Arizona.

"Mother Jones...got results. She was by far the most famous and charismatic organizer for the United Mine Workers. When she began ...it had 10,000 members; within a few years, 300,000 men had joined, and she organized many of their wives into "mop and broom" brigades, militant women who fought alongside their husbands.

"...Working families, Mother Jones argued, possessed vast, untapped powers to fight the corporations that bound them to starvation wages and the corrupt politicians who did the businessmen's bidding...(She mistakenly) believed that suffrage was a false issue, a bourgeois diversion from the real problem of worker exploitation. She argued that only powerful organizations of workers – industrial unions – could bring justice. And while she helped organize women in various trades, she believed that working-class women were better off in the home than having their labor exploited.

"...Her single-mindedness sometimes blinded her to the unique issues facing women and minorities. Yet ...she offers a vivid reminder of what remains among the most under-acknowledged issues of our day: that America is a class-riven society, where the wealthy have grown obscenely rich as working people have fallen further behind".



campaign against violence against women. We now have...members based in sixty factories. We are planning our own mayday rally, with five thousand workers, during the day, and ten thousand after work has finished at night time."

Socialist pioneers

It is on 8 March every year that, across the world, activists in the workers' movement remember all women who have fought to transform their conditions and the class-ridden society around them. There are the well known figures of Eleanor Marx and Rosa Luxembour, who have inspired generations of working men and women to see the real advantages that can be gained through struggling for the socialist transformation of society. Clara Zetkin and Inessa Armand were also great European female class fighters brought hope of genuine socialist liberation to millions of working class and poor women.

But the USA also has its heroines of working class struggle. It was there that the first International Women's Day protest demonstration happened, organised in 1857 by female textile workers in New York. It is appropriate, as US imperialism tries to stride unchallenged

across the globe, to remember one particular woman, Mother (Mary) Jones. She devoted her life to organising workers, campaigning against child labour and exposing the suffering caused to millions of American workers and their families by the big corporations.

The Russian revolutionary leader, Leon Trotsky was unstinting in his admiration for her. "Jones represents a splendid landmark in the history of her class...In her...descriptions of strikers' battles, Jones incidentally reveals a horrifying picture of the underside of American capitalism and its democracy....What unflagging devotion to the working people, what organic contempt for the traitors and careerists from among the working class 'leaders'. With 91 years of life behind her, this woman of a Pan American Workers' Congress held up the example of Soviet Russia..." (Diary in Exile).

Numerous other heroic and self-sacrificing women have led determined struggles against exploitation and oppression in the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

On this special day, socialist women everywhere pledge themselves to try and emulate their personal courage and their dedication to the struggle against the bosses and their system.

Sexism and the fight for socialism

As long as class society has existed, the dominant slave-owning, land-owning or capitalist class has devised numerous ways of maintaining its control in society, in spite of always being a minority. There are the courts, the prisons, the police and the armies. And there are the ideologies and the propaganda machines. Sowing seeds of division - by race, by religion and by gender - has always been a means of trying to stave off revolt and revolution.

As the family has evolved, working class women have been expected to be dependent and subservient. Even as part of the labour force, they have carried the main burden of work in the home to bring up the next generation of workers. Laws, religion, advertising are all means for perpetuating this state of affairs. Making women feel weak and inferior and only

valued for gratifying men's needs, sentenced to a life of double oppression, is all part of the process.

In some countries of Europe and elsewhere, in the recent period, there has been a resurgence of the kind of advertising which turns women into objects. There has also been a big growth in 'amusements' like lap-dancing and pole-dancing. Many young women in particular are angry about these developments. They see this as sexism and as a way of perpetuating the idea of women as second class citizens, as toys or as people whose bodies are mere commodities in the world of buying and selling and whose minds and wills count for nothing. They see this as oppressive and demeaning.

But some young women, misguidedly, we believe, see this development as 'liberating' and 'empowering' - giving women a chance to earn good money, to assert themselves, even to dominate men through their sexuality. There has been a change in the objective situation of many women but seeing this as an advance indicates a limited vision of 'liberation'.

It also indicates how far back the ideas have receded of cooperative and collective action to win real equality of opportunity, status, pay etc. for women. The main reason has been the apparent ideological triumph of individualism and neo-liberalism over state involvement and socialism and the relative lull, until recently, of strike and community struggles. After the collapse of the bureaucratically planned, state-owned economies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, most leaders of the workers' parties and organisations went over to the idea that there was no alternative to capitalism.

But we, as socialists, are convinced of the need to eliminate private property from the spheres of industry, finance and land and to gear production, education, health provision, housing etc. to the needs of the majority and not to producing profit for the few. Public ownership would have to be linked to all important aspects of planning being carried out by democratically elected bodies of representatives

from the whole working community.

This is how we believe the material basis could be developed for a society totally free from wars and exploitation and free from compulsion and violence - a society where no boss, no government, no man can force women to do anything they do not choose to do and where the values of equality and cooperation would be reflected in culture and personal relations.

Socialist demands

New mass workers' parties need to be built to pursue this aim, but trade unions must also put more energy into fighting for women's rights as workers. As combat organisations, they must fight any discrimination against women and protect women workers from sexual harassment at work

Domestic violence has been exposed by socialists who have campaigned for unions to support individual women workers and demand more resources for refuges and other vital support to women at risk from violent partners or family members.

- We fight for women at work to receive the same pay - for their time, skill and effort - as that of any male doing the same work.
- We fight for women to be able to choose whether and when to have children, without constraint by material difficulties - lack of food, shelter, education and recreation - for themselves and the next generation.

Women in poverty are prey to the most horrific form of exploitation - prostitution. The sex 'trade' has long been an atrocious scourge of class society. The money made from human trafficking is said to be reaching the scale of trade in narcotics and in arms. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the catastrophic deterioration of the economies of Russia and Eastern Europe undoubtedly added to the numbers of women seeking an escape and finding themselves in a new and worse kind of slavery. The extension of the European Union to the East may make it easier for the gangsters who organise these rackets to ply their trade. It is estimated that between 500,000 and 1 mil-

lion women and children have been transported across Europe to the USA alone in the last two years or so.

● We are against the use of women and their bodies in pornography, in the sex industry or for prostitution. Where women are drawn into these activities - be it by the promise of a better future, by sheer poverty or by physical coercion, as in the case of human trafficking - we argue for the fullest support from state-financed social and medical workers.

● In the interests of the most down-trodden women and of all working class women, we believe the opportunity to have an education and training and a job with healthy conditions and equal pay must be a right of all. We demand decent jobs, education and housing for all, regardless of race, sex, religious belief or sexual orientation.

Capitalism cannot guarantee any of these basic rights over a long period of time. It is an exploitative and oppressive system, rotten to the core.

The socialist movement

Working class and poor women who are angry about these things should have every opportunity to participate in struggles on the issues and in the struggle to achieve a socialist society - that is, to participate in the life and work of the parties of our socialist international. We must encourage their self-education as conscious fighters for the socialist revolution. We must also encourage recognition by men in the workers' movement of the vital importance of having women workers involved and not isolated and subject to reactionary propaganda.

Practical help with child-care and safe transport are important to ensure attendance as much at study circles on history and theory as at party branch meetings on the issues of the day. They are also needed to ensure women comrades can participate in the campaigns they most want to - be it against hospital or school closures, for free education for all, against attempts to put the clock back on abortion, contraception or divorce, or simply for building the parties of revolutionary social-

ism on the stalls and demonstrations.

Women's struggle with "Tradition" in class society

It is no accident that in many countries world-wide it is mainly younger women who take to the streets on demonstrations, driven by anger on issues they feel strongly about. They exercise their right to express their feelings, regardless of what family, 'tradition', religious teachings or men might say. But as both the pressure and the inclination increase to find a long-term partner and have children, the restrictions on such activity will be more palpable. Many women will tend towards accepting the 'status quo' - including the fact that society is dominated by big business, by rich land-owners and predominantly by men, and that there are only individual solutions to the problems which surround them. But new movements and class struggles can again break down their acceptance of this situation.

It was clear in the opinion polls of this time last year in many countries that women made up the majority of those who were opposed to the imperialist war in Iraq. In Sweden, later in the year, it was also demonstrated that women as well as youth were behind the resounding majority given to the 'NO' vote against the capitalist European Union. They are overwhelmingly opposed to the cuts in the welfare system being carried through by the Social Democratic government.

As everywhere, it is working class women who are the first to suffer from the state renegeing on its responsibilities of caring - for the elderly, the sick and the very young. It was also women who made up the majority of workers on strike in Sweden during the campaign of the public sector workers' in the union, Komunal. With the continuing campaigns of capitalist governments world-wide to pursue neo-liberal policies and cut back on all social welfare spending, it is imperative for working class and poor women to fight back.

Huge improvements can be won in the situation faced by women - in the workplace, in the home and in society - through struggle.

This Russian revolutionary poster reads:
“Working and peasant women - Fight to overcome the legacies of the past. Build a new socialist life”



Sometimes mass protest and action on a single issue such as abortion rights can bring results. Many working class and poor women have been involved in struggles like the landless movement in Brazil or the anti-poll tax campaign in Britain and have seen important victories which should make a real difference to their lives.

In Brazil, land has been occupied and tilled, against the wishes of the wealthy land-owners. Now there is a 'Without Roofs' movement, led almost exclusively by women, that organised the squatting of empty housing in the cities. In

Britain, Maggie Thatcher, the hated woman prime minister, was forced to resign when her 'flagship' anti-working class taxation policy was abandoned. Of course, without a further political struggle to establish genuine workers' control and management in a socialist society, gains like these will be undermined.

Campaigns by women workers in neo-colonial countries to organise unions and to take action against their super-exploitation have often frightened employers into easing their conditions. Men and women workers striking together can achieve important results, such as on

issues of equal pay for work of equal value.

Revolution and counter-revolution

The most dramatic gains for working class women were achieved by the socialist revolution in Russia 87 years ago. The country had an economy that was predominantly rural and backward and where the life of working class and peasant women was double oppression writ large. Within months of the establishment of a socialist, workers' government, the most wide-ranging reforms were carried through. These included the right to civil marriage, to divorce and abortion on demand. Measures aimed at freeing women from domestic drudgery at home and wage and other discrimination at work were adopted. Education for both sexes was a priority of the new soviet-run government and included a major campaign to eliminate illiteracy.

There was a phenomenal growth in the provision of nursery facilities for pre-school children. But ambitious projects to develop community laundries, restaurants and repair shops to do the tasks of the pre-revolutionary housewife ran almost immediately into difficulties created by lack of resources in the harsh conditions of the early, Civil War years. Priorities had to be decided. The production of labour-saving devices for the home and investment in buildings, equipment and staff for communal facilities were pushed down on the agenda.

By the time Stalin carried through his counter-revolution against the Bolsheviks and the working class as a whole, the state-owned economy was being run by a bureaucracy, which facilitated the coming to power of this loathsome dictator. As Marx had predicted, even after a social revolution, where want and shortages persist, "All the old crap will return". This was certainly true in relation to how the bureaucracy treated working people and the peasantry and, in the sphere of production and services, "Quality escaped them like a shadow", as Trotsky put it.

In relation to women's rights, the clock was turned back decisively under Stalin. The role of the family and the importance of motherhood were re-emphasised in official propagan-

da as efforts to truly liberate women from household chores and from oppressive 'tradition' were severely curtailed. This was done partly because the revolution was isolated to a backward country but it was also clumsy and bureaucratic measures were taken to try and replenish the population of a devastated country and economy. Stalin also changed the party line in relation to women and the family very consciously, in the interests of perpetuating the idea of authority coming from above. It was a way of inculcating submission by women and children to the needs of the (totalitarian) state and not the tailoring of the workers' state to fulfil the needs of working women and their children.

But this was not before some brilliant innovative projects affecting women and children had been attempted. Bolshevik educationalists adopted new child-oriented (and child-controlled) forms of education. Bolshevik women initiated campaigns aimed at drawing women of the mainly Muslim central Asian republics into the modern world of socialist advance. The latter were veritable experiments and included the setting up of 'Red Tea Houses', 'Women's shops' and 'Red tents'. The latter would travel with the nomadic Muslim tribes and most of them carried three vital propaganda weapons - a sewing machine, milk separator and film projector.

Bolshevik women volunteers would often begin their campaigns with social gatherings, sewing groups and discussions about making things and growing things. But classes in literacy and numeracy and in women's health and personal hygiene were held and, with child care, at least for these activities, women were encouraged to participate as fully as possible in political life, in work out of the home and in the building of socialism.

Well-meaning projects like these, operated by dedicated and self-sacrificing women, had a big effect, with the advantage that they had behind them the experience of a successful revolution against the old order. Strenuous attempts were also made to 'win over' the men in the Muslim communities to the idea of

women being involved in these projects. Some were successful. Inevitably some also encountered stubborn hostility from within the Muslim communities. On some occasions it was of such ferocity that women were killed or driven to take their own life.

Muslim women today

At the present time, a widespread discussion has been unleashed about Muslim women in European countries wearing or not wearing the 'traditional' hijab or headscarf. Socialists of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) and its sections world-wide are opposed to any form of compulsion in relation to what is essentially a personal matter. We condemn the measures being taken by the right wing government of Chirac in France and other authorities in Europe to ban the wearing of the hijab in schools and workplaces and to exclude women who continue to wear them.

The CWI has prepared a statement which goes into more detail on the issue. But we believe it is misguided of anyone who champions the rights of women and opposes the elements of repression contained within any set of right-wing religious beliefs to imagine that you can combat compulsion with compulsion - especially with compulsion by the state. Our comrades in France have been campaigning against the ban on the slogan of: "the right of all to education - veiled and unveiled".

The moves to ban the hijab in France are fuelling the flames of racism. They are far from even-handed and do nothing to assist in the liberation of young women in a country where the Catholic Church still has a loud voice raised against abortion, divorce and contraception. In the USA, the neoconservatives have a major influence in the White House with all their reactionary prescriptions which

repress the rights of women and of racial and sexual minorities.

The CWI and the fight ahead

The CWI fights all attempts to turn back the wheel of history on the achievements of women in relation to their right to make the major decisions in life for themselves. We fight for the legal rights and material provisions in every society to allow women to pursue an education and a career, or not to, and to decide if and when to have children etc. We believe working class women should be materially and morally supported on whatever course they decide to take.

Women who want to throw off the double oppression they face, must clearly understand the forces they are up against - the domination of society by the property-owning classes and the concomitant of patriarchal control. The example of the Bolshevik women fighters also shows that collective support is necessary for any woman who chooses to break the iron grip of 'tradition' which denies her basic rights.

It is a major task of socialists to encourage working class and poor women to stand up for themselves and their rights, and to get involved in collective struggle for change on issues of importance to them. As vital for them is the stepping up of the struggle for socialism, for the kind of sweeping social change that can show immediate material benefits and bring an end to war, civil wars, want and poverty. In a socialist society based on public ownership and run on cooperative principles, all the additional scourges of capitalist society - chauvinism, racism and bigotry - would melt away and a new era of human development open up for every woman, every man and every child on the planet.

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is a campaigning international socialist organisation with members and sections in 40 countries in every continent.

To find out more about us and read our up to date analysis of events and issues of concern to all working people, look up the CWI web-site: www.socialistworld.net

If you would like to join us or get in touch with CWI members where you are, contact us:

email: cwi@worldsoc.co.uk. Post: Committee for a Workers' International, PO Box 3688, London, Britain, E11 1YE. Tel: ++ 44 20 8988 8760 Fax: ++ 44 20 8988 8793

www.socialistworld.net