

International Women's Day 2005 Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) Statement



Public-sector strike, South Africa, September 2004

**Make poverty and
inequality history - fight
the system of poverty
and inequality.
Fight capitalism!**

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Make poverty and inequality history - fight the system of poverty and inequality: Fight capitalism!

In 2005, socialists celebrate the revolutionary events that swept Russia one hundred years ago. Russia, in 1905, saw mass political general strikes and the creation of the first soviets or elected councils of workers' deputies - the most democratic, fighting organisations in the life and death struggle against autocracy and against the exploiting classes.

In the melee of those turbulent events - which were a "dress rehearsal" for the revolutionary year of 1917, when the first ever workers' government was established - an event stood out in the memory of one of the leaders of the revolutionary leaders, Leon Trotsky. Trotsky wrote in his account of a meeting of the Petersburg Soviet on 12 November 1905, about how a woman textile worker raised the fighting spirit of the entire assembly with her passionate plea for a fight to the finish on the issue of the 8 hour working day.

"A middle-aged woman weaver from Maxwell's factory rose to speak. She had a fine, open face; she wore a faded cotton dress although it was late autumn. Her hand trembled with excitement as she nervously fingered her collar. Her voice had a ringing, inspired, unforgettable quality. 'You've let your wives get accustomed to sleeping in soft beds and eating sweet food,' she hurled at the Putilov delegates [who were proposing acceptance of at least a temporary retreat]. 'That's why you are afraid of losing your jobs. But we aren't afraid. We're prepared to die, but we'll get the eight-hour day. We'll fight to the end. Victory or death! Long live the eight-hour day!'

'To this day, [writes Trotsky] thirty months later, this voice of hope, despair, and passion is still ringing in my ears, a lasting reproach, an indomitable call to action. Where are you now, heroic comrade in faded cotton? Ah, you were accustomed to sleep in a soft bed and eat sweet food . . .

'The ringing voice came to a halt. There was a moment of painful silence. Then a storm of passionate applause. At that moment the delegates, who had been bowed down by an oppressive sense of helplessness under the capitalist yoke, rose high above their everyday cares. They were applauding their future victory over cruelty and inhumanity.'

Extract from Leon Trotsky's book, '1905'. From the chapter entitled, 'Eight hours and a gun'

For the woman "in faded cotton" and for all working women, it would mean the chance of enjoying at least some aspects of public and private life rather than merely staggering from long hours of wage slavery in the factory to more hours of drudgery at home. Towards the end of 1905, as workers were sacked and factories closed, as the bosses

and the Tsar's government regained control in society, it was not possible to pursue that particular struggle to a conclusion. But, after the victory of the working class, under Bolshevik leadership in October 1917, the eight hour day for all workers was one of the first measures to be enacted. It was swiftly followed by many other measures which were aimed at freeing women from the double burden of work and household chores - free abortion, civil marriage, nursery facilities, public canteens and laundry facilities.

The erosion of these reforms, through the isolation of the revolution in a backward country and the rise of Stalinism, can take nothing away from the ideals and priorities expressed, in practice, by the first ever socialist, workers' government. But how do things stand today in the world of advanced technology and globalisation?

Women and work in the 21st century

Over the last decade, the number of women in the global labour force has increased by 200 million. In 2004, women accounted for 1.1 billion of the 2.8 billion people officially in work. This means women make up 40% of the global workforce. But, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), women are less likely to hold regular paid jobs and more likely to be in the informal economy, outside legal and regulatory frameworks. Moreover, women generally earn less than men for the same type of work, even in female dominated occupations.

The vast majority of women today, no matter what part of the world they live in, are hit hardest by the neo-liberal attacks carried out against the working class as a whole. Mass lay offs, insecure working conditions, low pay, attacks on the welfare state, on pension rights, and on childcare facilities, as well as attacks on women's reproductive rights, will not only lead to an increase in women's poverty and suffering but, most likely, will also lead to an increasing political radicalisation of women and working class women, in particular.

The next period will undoubtedly see an increase in working class struggles across the world and working class women will certainly put their stamp on the struggles to come.

Fighting poverty

Women make up 60% of the world's workforce earning less than a \$1 a day. This figure, and the level of poverty, in general, will undoubtedly increase once the full scale of the repercussions of the Tsunami disaster is revealed. The Tsunami, and the criminal neglect on the part of imperialism and of anti-working class governments in not installing early warning systems in the Indian Ocean, took nearly 300,000 lives. In addition, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 1 million jobs have been lost in Sri Lanka and

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Photo Paul Mattsson

Indonesia alone, as a consequence of the Tsunami.

Today, the ILO claims that between 50-60% of the affected people will be able to earn their own living again by the end of 2005, providing aid and support can be mobilised rapidly.

Given the bad record of capitalist governments in delivering promised aid and money, this development is very unlikely unless those governments come under tremendous pressure from below.

As a result of capitalist governments' corruption, bias, incompetence and unwillingness to substantially rebuild the lives of the Tsunami affected people, we will see many more dying from poverty related diseases. But we will also see, as always, that the majority of refugees and the most vulnerable victims of the disaster will be women and children.

Poverty, sexual abuse and HIV/Aids

Poverty is also the main cause of the horrors that determine the everyday life of millions of people on the African continent.

Rosa Luxemburg, one of the most inspiring and determined revolutionary leaders of the German working class movement of the early 20th Century, once said that humanity faces two choices: Socialism or Barbarism.

One of the latest and most horrific examples of the barbarism that rules large parts of the African continent is the nightmare that has opened up in Sudan. Thousands of families have been driven out of their homes and are starving and dying in the poorly equipped refugee camps.

As in other civil war or war situations, mass rape and other forms of sexual violence against women are used as a means of warfare. The victims of violence and sexual abuse very often suffer from irreparable psychological damage. In many cases, suicide appears to be the only solution

to those women who have lived through the horrors of violence and humiliation.

Poverty, sexual violence, and lack of education amongst women, have led, over the past two years, to an increase in the number of women living with HIV/Aids in every region of the world.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the sharpest increase - of 56% - occurred in East Asia, followed by a 46% increase in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, the worst affected region, close to 60% of adults living with HIV are women. Young women aged 15-24 are three or four times more likely to be infected than young men of the same age. For many girls and young women, their first sexual experience is coerced.

Due to a lack of information and education, the reality is that in a number of African countries, men believe they can protect themselves against the deadly virus by having sex with young women that have not had any sexual experience. As a consequence, in many cases those young women are raped and are infected with HIV/Aids.

According to WHO, by July 2004, only 440,000 people had access to Aids treatment out of the six million who need it in the neo-colonial world.

Some politicians, like the British Chancellor, Gordon Brown, recently discovered their heartfelt sympathy for Africa. He has urged a 'Marshall Plan' for the "lost continent". But, for as long as capitalism exists, it is an illusion to believe that Africa and other deprived areas of the world will be lifted out of poverty. The money promised to those countries is peanuts compared to what is spent on continuing the imperialist occupation of Iraq.

In order to successfully fight poverty and HIV/Aids, a clear break with capitalism is needed which will end the dictatorship of the IMF and the World Bank. As part of that

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international struggle, the pharmaceutical industry needs to be nationalised and taken under workers' control and management. This is the only way of ensuring a future, and a life worth living, for the masses in the neo-colonial world.

The potential, readiness, and capability of the African working class to unite and fight against attacks on their living standards, were indicated last year by important strike movements in two significant countries on the African continent. South Africa has seen the biggest ever public sector strike and Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, has seen several general strikes against the governments' hikes in fuel prices.

In both cases, women have made a big contribution to the solid character of the strike actions.

Bush's re-election and the attack on women's rights

When George W. Bush was re-elected for a second term in office in November 2004, millions of anti-war activists, environmental activists and many working people across the world were dismayed. But now, leaning on the Christian religious right in the US, Bush has used his election win to launch major attacks on women's rights and the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual (LGTB) community.

Bush presents himself as the upholder of the "traditional American way of life", by opposing same-sex marriage and a woman's right to choose. Eleven state ballot initiatives to ban same sex marriage were passed in recent months. The reactionary character of the religious fundamentalist wing within the Republican Party was summed up by Senator Tom Coburn, who promised on polling day, last November, to "ban abortions and execute any doctors who carry them out".

In an attempt to impose its policies against a women's right to choose on the rest of the world, the Bush administration demanded that the United Nations publicly renounce abortion rights.

Undoubtedly, Bush's re-election marks a set-back for women in the US. But it will also provoke major opposition and a fight back on the part of the women's movement, as was shown by the 'Million Women' march in defence of the right to choose on April 2004. Socialist Alternative, the US affiliate to the CWI, participated in what was the biggest ever women's rights demonstration. and called for a new working class party in the US. They also demanded, "Free Abortion on Demand" and "Free Health and Childcare".

Only a few weeks into his second term, the Bush administration launched a domestic war against its own working class, which will plunge large sections of the population into poverty.

In order to meet Bush's campaign pledge of halving the US budget deficit, the White House announced the toughest austerity measures since the days of Ronald Reagan, one of the architects of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s. The attacks include sweeping cuts in welfare, education, and housing programmes for the poor. An estimated US\$ 1.1 billion alone are meant to be cut from the food stamps programme which helps the poorest people in the US buy gro-



Pensioners protest in Russia.

ceries. The plan also includes squeezing Medicaid, a scheme that provides healthcare for the poor. On top of that, plans to privatise the pension scheme were revealed.

In combination with the quagmire US imperialism faces in Iraq, and the fact that the homeland security and defence budgets are the only ones that remain untouched, this provides a potentially very explosive mix in the US.

Undoubtedly, initiatives like 'Military Families Speak Out', which demand the withdrawal of the troops from Iraq, and in which mothers of soldiers killed in Iraq play a prominent role, are likely to play a key part in opposing and organising resistance against the Bush administration.

In a leaflet to commemorate the start of the war, two years ago, they say: "In this, the richest country in the world, soldiers return home from war to an uncertain economic future. Their teenage children see no way to enter college...We applaud the \$335 million promised to tsunami victims, but the US spends that amount every three days in Iraq. We need money for jobs and education and not for war and occupations."

Bosses' offensive and the fight back

Bosses and capitalist governments in the advanced capitalist world are on the offensive to destroy the remnants of the welfare state that was built under pressure from the working class after the Second World War.

Again, women, and especially single mothers, will be hit hardest by these attacks. The so called 'reform' of unemployment legislation in Germany is not only part of the biggest impoverishment programme in post war German history; it also enforces traditional gender roles. The reforms that have taken place since January this year, takes a partners' income into account when allocating the level of unemployment benefit a person is entitled to receive.

In addition, the changes will badly affect single parents. Single mothers are already more likely to be unemployed over a longer period of time due to insufficient childcare facilities etc. They will therefore be more likely to be hit by the new benefit laws, which will cut unemployment benefits down (per month) to 345 in the West and 331 in the East,

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after one year of unemployment. As a consequence, child poverty, which has already reached a record high in one of the richest countries in the world, will increase even further.

The same types of benefit cuts are taking place across Europe. In Britain, the Blair government's attacks on pension rights are explicitly discriminating against women whose pensions are already generally lower than those of men.

The proposed new regulations will not only see a general rise in pension age from 60 to 65 in the public sector, it will also see a decisive cut in women's pensions. In the current legislation, the maximum pension is largely determined by the wages the pensioner got before retirement. Usually, they are the highest in a person's working life. But the new legislation takes the whole career into account. While this may be of advantage for some workers, women who have breaks in their careers because of childcare responsibilities will see a de-facto cut in their pensions.

Socialist Party (CWI) members in the public sector unions in England and Wales, and the International Socialists (CWI) in Scotland, have played an absolutely vital and decisive role in arguing and pushing the case for a national, one day, public sector strike to defend pension rights on 23 March.

In Russia, pensioners have also started a magnificent fight back against attacks by the Putin government. Mass demonstrations, blockades of highways and other forms of protest, have been spontaneously organised in many cases by women pensioners. The resistance and protests led to a partial victory. Putin had to step back and make concessions. In some areas, for example, the Russian President had to allow local councils to reinstate free travel for pensioners.

The last year has seen a general upswing in working class protests, particularly in Europe. Women played an important role in those protests. However, the fact that women are often the most determined and committed fighters in the struggle to defend living standards, wages, and working conditions, was highlighted by the heroic strike of the nursery nurses across Scotland. Around 4,000, mainly women workers, took part in a nine week, all-out strike over pay and recognition. The majority of the nursery nurses involved had no tradition of activity in unions, never mind taking part in any strike. This reflects an important change in consciousness and gave a glimpse of what the determination of women workers in action will be like in the future as class battles explode.

The deepening of the crisis of the capitalist system will also see a rise in mass redundancies. The younger generation will find it increasingly difficult to get a permanent and decent job. The situation is dire for young women. Young women between 15 and 24 years old already make up nearly 50% of all females who are unemployed.

The CWI in Belgium, Linkse Socialistische Partij/Mouvement pour une Alternative Socialiste (LSP/MAS), initiated a 'Youth March for Jobs, Free Education and against Racism', which will take place on 19 March.

In this campaign, the situation facing women will be given emphasis. They call for decent wages, the right to a full time job, proper funding of public services, such as nurseries, and an end to sexism and racism in the workplaces.

By doing so, LSP/MAS will try to encourage young working class women to make their voices heard on 19 March.

Sex trafficking and prostitution

It has been the re-introduction of capitalism in the former Soviet Union, and other countries in Eastern Europe, the slaughtering of all the advances of the planned economy, and the subsequent dramatic increase in poverty, that is primarily responsible for the increase in prostitution and sex trafficking in and from those countries.

Human trafficking is nothing else but the modern practice of slavery and the most brutal form of exploitation. It is the third largest criminal industry in the world today, following arms and drug dealing. It is the fastest growing criminal industry and is one of the most "lucrative" sectors of the trade in people, and involves prostitution, pornography, bride trafficking, and commercial sexual abuse of children.

Without disguise, sex trafficking exposes the brutal and greedy nature of capitalism, which strives to turn everyone and everything into commodities in order to make profits, no matter at what cost. Sex trafficking generates billions of dollars in profit at a very low risk for the traffickers.

Promises of a better life, an end to a life of misery, are how most women and girls get trapped into the vicious world of sex trafficking. Every year, an estimated 30-50,000 women and children are trafficked into the US alone.

Once in the US, a woman can earn their captors an average of US\$ 30,000 a week by being raped around 20 times a day, seven days a week. If women refuse, they are beaten and sometimes killed.

Allegedly in order to improve the situation for prostitutes, some countries have introduced so-called 'tolerance zones' or have even declared prostitution legal.

The bitter reality of declaring prostitution legal was recently revealed by a woman in Germany, where prostitution was legalised in 2002. Recent changes in the unemployment law can force people to accept almost any job that is offered to them. An unemployed woman IT specialist was offered a job as a bar woman by the job centre. The bar turned out to be a brothel and the unemployed woman was expected to work as a prostitute. Refusing to work there, she was threatened with having her unemployment benefit cut. Similar cases were reported in the Netherlands. While public outrage makes it rather unlikely that such a policy will be implemented in those countries, at this stage, those are the facts created by legalisation of prostitution.

The need for new mass parties of the working class

The beginnings of International Women's Day go back to the middle of the 19th Century and in those days expressed a mounting pressure for women's rights in the US and Europe. In the early years of the 20th century, the campaign for women's suffrage was one of the central demands of the women's movement and International Women's Day. It sometimes took decades of struggle before general suffrage was achieved in most parts of the world. Even today,

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Photo Marcus Kolbrunner

one century later, it is still not a basic democratic right for every woman in the world. Where women do have the right to vote, working class women, like the working class in general, find it more difficult to find a party to vote for that defends their interests.

The elections in Afghanistan, held in September 2004, were trumpeted by the pro-capitalist media and used as one reason to legitimise the invasion of the country after the horrific 9/11 attacks.

Special attention was given to the fact that 40% of the registered voters were female. This was presented as a huge step forward for women's rights in Afghanistan. While we welcome the fact that women were entitled to cast their vote, the situation for women in Afghanistan is still largely determined by feudal traditions and by remnants of the anti-women legislation previously introduced by the reactionary Taliban regime. The same is true for other parts of the world.

In Baluchistan, a province in Pakistan that is still dominated and ruled by tribal and feudal leaders, women are hardly visible in public life. Education for women is non-existent because it is not allowed by tribal law. Women are barely allowed to leave their homes. Honour killings, forced marriages, and other cruel, inhumane customs and traditions, are widely practiced.

According to traditional 'customs', a woman who meets a man she is not acquainted with needs to sit down on the ground and turn her back to this man. She has to remain in that position until the stranger has passed by.

While reactionary and feudal laws like this will not disappear over night, it is also a fact that capitalism is offering no way forward, economically and subsequently also culturally, to develop these countries. This is to a large extent why women stand no chance to break out of these horrific conditions.

The Socialist Movement in Pakistan, which is affiliated to the CWI, pays particular attention to the situation facing women. In the last year, they held public meetings and special workshops on the question of domestic violence. The Socialist Movement comrades are also involved in a campaign to abolish the 'Hudood Laws', which are completely discriminatory and anti-women. For example, under these laws, a victim of rape needs the evidence of four males to prove the rape took place otherwise she will be prosecuted for 'adultery'.

As a consequence of speaking out against this repression, activists from the Socialist Movement campaign received threats from religious fundamentalists.

A very important part of the work of the campaign, however, is devoted to unionising women in the informal working sector, and to campaign for a mass working class party that would be to the forefront of campaigning for women's rights.

Political Voice

On a world scale, only 15.2% of representatives in national parliaments are women. At the same time, women are searching for parties which they believe will represent their interests. This is reflected in the discussion around the possible setting up of a Women's Party, initiated by a woman who has been an ex-leader of the Left Party in Sweden. In opinion polls, up to 20% - many of them low paid women workers - have indicated that they are considering voting for this party. As socialists, we do not believe that a higher representation of women MPs will automatically improve the situation of working class women. Their interests are not represented by female MPs, ministers or presidents, such as US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, Germany's

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Minister for Health, Ulla Schmidt, the British Minister for Education, Ruth Kelly, or the Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, all of whom introduce policies that attack the working class. The two Belgian ministers that have most viciously attacked strikes by the largely female dominated health sector are female.

Nevertheless the low number of females in parliaments is an indication of the patriarchal character of politics today.

There can be no doubt that socialists welcome and, in fact, strive for a greater participation of working class women in politics and political activity.

The CWI campaigns for the building of new mass parties of the working class across the world. Wherever there are signs of the establishment of genuine formations created by the working class, the CWI is engaged in building those forces and campaigning for those forces to adopt a socialist programme.

In the last year, the formation of P-SOL (Party for Socialism and Liberty) in Brazil, and ASG (Work and Social Justice- the electoral alternative) in Germany, has marked a decisive step towards the building of such new workers' parties.

While the character of these new formations is not absolutely clear at this stage, their success and future development will also depend on what programme and campaigns they will put forward to fight and improve the living standards of working class women, to defend women's rights, and to what degree they will be able to involve working class women in struggles.

In order to improve the lives of working class women, socialists in these new parties need to fight for a programme that:

- rejects the neo-liberal attacks of the bosses and their governments

- organises resistance against redundancies
- fights for a reduction in the working week without loss of pay
- campaigns for full time jobs for all
- campaigns against low pay and for a decent minimum wage
- organises joint campaigns with the trade union movement to help unionise non-unionised work places
- fights for free and decent childcare facilities for all age groups
- defends the right of women to decide when and if they want to have children
- campaigns against domestic violence, sexual harassment at work and all forms of discrimination in society

Ultimately, for women to live life free from poverty and oppression of any kind, it is necessary to overthrow the profit ridden, capitalist system.

This can only be achieved by a mass movement of the working class that will nationalise and take into public control the big corporations and companies which have accumulated enormous wealth by exploiting the working class internationally.

Working class women will be vital in this struggle that will eventually lead to the emancipation of humankind and to true equality between men and women.

At the first 'All Russian Congress of Working Women', in October 1918, Lenin argued that "The experience of all liberation movements has shown that the success of a revolution depends on how much women take part in it".

This is still relevant today, and the success of building new strong mass parties of the working class depends on how much they manage to welcome and integrate working class women into their own ranks.

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