



**Committee for a
Workers' International**

International Women's Day 2006

SOCIALISTS FIGHT WOMEN'S OPPRESSION WORLDWIDE



www.socialistworld.net

Contents:

1. Pakistan. Women facing slavery, discrimination and exploitation

Rukhsana Manzoor, Socialist Movement Pakistan

2. South Africa. Gendercide in the so-called 'Age of Hope'

Sheri Hamilton, Democratic Socialist Movement

3. Venezuela. Women workers occupy Selfex factory

Elisabeth O'Hara, Socialist Party (England and Wales)

4. Germany. Women organise against "Lidl" stores

David Matrai, Berlin

5. Sweden. Campaigns and counter-campaigns on women's issues

Elin Gauffin, Rättvisepartiet Socialisterna

6. England and Wales. Real rights for women to choose (extract)

Zena Awad, Socialist Party (England and Wales)

7. Belgium. Radicalisation of workers affects young women

Marijke Descamps, LSP/MAS (CWI) Belgium

8. Australia. Socialists campaigning for women's rights

Samantha Ashby, Socialist Party

9. USA. Women of today and yesterday

Margaret Collins, Socialist Alternative

10. A world of violence against women - the hard facts

Compiled from United Nations and other reports

Socialists fight women's oppression worldwide



Women workers fight for their rights against the Gate Gourmet bosses at Heathrow Airport.

Photo Molly Cooper

To mark International Women's Day (8 March) this year, the Committee for a Workers' International is publishing a collection of nine articles contributed by members of our sections across the globe. While they certainly underline the horrors of daily life for a large part of the world's women, as capitalism holds them in subjection, they also point to campaigns and mobilisations that give women the hope of achieving real changes in their lives.

Rukhsana Manzoor of the Socialist Movement in Pakistan and Sheri Hamilton of the Democratic Socialist Movement in South Africa write of the agonising sufferings prevalent amongst wide layers of women in their countries. They describe the hypocrisy of the ruling elites and the way they perpetuate a callous disregard in society for the lives of women. Most are denied the right to a decent education, to healthcare and to fully participate in life outside the home.

Their survival is daily threatened; freedom from violence and poverty is a dream. There are examples of tremendous bravery on the part of women who try to break down the mores which are used to oppress them and the millions who suffer in silence.

International Women's Day is a chance to salute the sacrifices made by the great pioneers of the cause of working and poor women as well as the thousands of nameless heroines who have been persecuted for their efforts.

Today, as Rukhsana and Sheri point out, the failure of workers' organisations to take up the struggle for women's emancipation has worsened the fate of many, leaving them prey to reactionary fanatics. Mullahs and ministers of all kinds try to convince them that their salvation lies in subservience, obedience and even good (!) old-fashioned witchcraft. Rukhsana and Sheri also point to the activities of

socialists and to elements of a programme for combating these influences and giving courage to women themselves to fight back.

Organising and fighting

Two shorter articles reproduced here - one about a factory occupation in Venezuela and one about organising supermarket workers in Germany - deal with the problems of women in the workplace and the struggle against exploitation and redundancy as workers. Socialists see the struggle for equal job and education opportunities for women and equal pay for work of equal value as vital parts of women's struggle for emancipation.

We also champion the right of women to choose if and when to have children. This means free contraception and abortion on demand, free fertility treatment for any woman who wants it, sufficient maternity and paternity leave, free and good quality nursery provision and adequate state benefits to allow stress-free child-bearing and rearing.

Big strides forward have been made through struggle and through the fight for greater awareness of the problems of women in class-ridden society. This includes campaigns against sexism and the sex trade which perpetuate the idea of women as a commodity designed for the gratification of the needs of men. If you include the kind of enslavement mentioned in Rukhsana's article, across the globe, hundreds of millions of women are imprisoned legally or illegally by men to work for them and indirectly to maintain the status quo of class domination and exploitation.

Even in the wealthiest country of the world, the USA, the situation for the majority of women is getting no better. As Margaret Collins explains in her article, earlier reforms are actually under attack. The article about Sweden by Elin Gauffin also shows that, in developed capitalist countries, there are many ways in which women, especially working class women, are subjected to humiliation and danger.

A short extract from material prepared for the 'Socialist' in England and Wales, for International Women's Day indicates the huge pressures on young women to conform to stereotyped female roles and the sexism they face that comes with the 'commodification' of women in a system geared to profit. The reports from CWI members in Belgium and Australia show how socialists can increase awareness of those problems and set out to involve working class and young women in the fight to change society.

The shocking statistics about violence against women world-wide at the end of this collection of articles hide a myriad of horror stories in the individual lives of women. (They are taken from a longer analysis of recent United Nations and Amnesty International reports made by Elin Gauffin and available from the CWI).

Progress?

The historic elections this year of the first-ever women presidents in Africa and in Latin America - in Liberia and Chile - have been hailed as a breakthrough for women. It is true that they represent quite a political earthquake in both conti-

nents. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia and Michelle Bachelet in Chile have both known hardship and persecution, including the inside of prison cells under earlier dictatorships.

Johnson-Sirleaf has pushed for the first law of her presidency to be one tackling the scourge of rape endemic in her war-torn country. But, as a Harvard-trained economist, steeped in neo-liberal capitalist ideas, she is unlikely to come up with policies to end the nightmare of poverty in a country with a GDP of just over \$100 a year!

In Chile, Bachelet was the candidate of the so-called Socialist Part. She has already raised the need for radical reform of the highly restrictive laws on abortion and divorce - controversial in the reactionary religious political climate of her country. But, as a former minister in 'Concertacion' (Coalition) governments in Chile which carried out the dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, she cannot be expected to open the road to economic equality for women by challenging the system of capitalism itself.

Neither of these women, brave as they may be, will adopt socialist policies - the only ones capable of ending the rule of the rich and super-rich and lifting the economic and social burdens that weigh down on the majority of women throughout their two continents.

The workers' movement is the only force capable of transforming society to eliminate all injustice. But a struggle on the issues of equal pay, on domestic violence and sexual harassment can get results. They expose the system that tolerates the oppression of women and they can gain some temporary respite for women in terms of real improvements in their situation.

If the leaders of the trade unions and (former) workers' parties of the world had taken up with real vigour some of the most important issues for women and encouraged them to challenge the bosses and the system, the plight of working class women around the globe could have been much alleviated and their enthusiasm for the struggle for socialism much enhanced. But since the collapse of the state-owned, planned economies more than 15 years ago, almost all of them have accepted that capitalism is the only viable way of organising society.

This leads many to deny the values associated with socialism - of equal opportunity and collective organisation, state ownership and democratic planning. It means accepting as unchallengeable the inequalities of power and wealth, the class division of society, exploitation for profit and the domination of the world's economy by capitalist monopolies. The pernicious values that accompany this system must be forcefully combated, not least those that justify the unequal chances in life allotted to the majority of the world's women.

Fighting for the future

Socialists celebrate 8 March, International Women's Day, by renewing their determination to fight on an independent class basis for another world - a world without exploitation, private profit and oppression, hunger and wars. Socialism, the only possible alternative to capitalism, would have to be based on public not private ownership of major industry,

socialists fight women's oppression worldwide

land and finance. Production and distribution would have to be under the day to day control at every level of democratically elected bodies of working people - women and men - regularly elected and subject to immediate recall.

Working hours could be immediately cut and safe conditions at work and in the environment would enable women and men to enjoy healthy working, social and personal lives - with or without children as they choose. Harassment and discrimination because of gender, race or sexuality would soon become a distant memory, eliminated by vastly improved material conditions as well as by the values asserted within a community based on respect for individuals and

on social justice.

Only on the basis of development towards socialism would we see the establishment of widespread, genuine mutual cooperation - in neighbourhoods, in regions, in areas of the world and globally. Without classes, class conflict and oppression and with the sustainable and just development of human as well as natural resources, we would see an undreamed of flowering of humankind and every individual's true potential. At last a truly harmonious, as well as an unimaginably exciting life for all.

Clare Doyle, CWI

1. Pakistan

Women facing slavery, discrimination and exploitation

International Women's Day will be celebrated on 8th March in Pakistan and other countries with large Muslim populations in a situation where Islamic religious parties and groups are still agitating against the blasphemous cartoons printed in a Danish newspaper. Violent protests have been going on for weeks now. The issue has opened up another round of debate about Islam itself and Muslims being constantly under attack from the West. Islamic fundamentalists and religious parties are exploiting this situation to prove that Muslims are being oppressed by western powers.

But when it comes to the home front, those who are complaining about being oppressed by the West, turn out to be oppressors themselves in relation to women and children. Islamic fundamentalists and the religious right are responsible for the stark and horrific conditions faced by women in most of Muslim societies.

They help the ruling classes to suppress women. They also portray the struggle for women's rights as a western conspiracy against the "great traditions" and "family values" of these religious parties.

They never utter a single word against the horrible conditions faced by women. They have never agitated against the gang rapes and other crimes committed against women. These "liberators" of Muslim societies never protested against the inhuman and brutal treatment of women by the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

For the ruling and religious elite, constituted essentially from the same male, relatively affluent segment of society which perpetuates the abuse of women, the plight of poor women is a non-issue. Women in Pakistan will celebrate this year's International Women's Day in a very difficult situation.

Still in the 21st century, in many areas in Pakistan, women are not allowed to go to school. In many areas of Baluchistan, Sindh, North West Frontier Province, southern Punjab, it is impossible to see a woman in the markets or on the streets. The majority of Pakistani women are facing the conditions of the dark ages with no social, political and economic rights.

For them, domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, gang rape, injustice, forced marriages, honour killings and brutality are the realities of every day life. Discrimination against them is very visible in every field of life. 73% of women in the countryside labour in the rural economy, but no official report ever mentions their contribution. Women workers are cited as 23% of the total work force, but rural agriculture women workers are not included in that figure.

In the textile sector women workers are 35% of the total work force. Nearly 3 million women are working as domes-

tic servants and get anything between 500 to 2,000 rupees (£5 to £20) per month. These workers have no fixed working hours and time off in the week. Women workers in the private sector work 12 to 16 hours a day without any break. Compared with male workers, female workers get 40% less in wages.

The number of women workers in Pakistan's work-force is on the rise, but this is not reflected within the labour movement because there are very few women in the trade unions. The male-dominated unions are not showing any interest in recruiting female members into the unions. Male-chauvinist union leaders discourage female workers.

Nearly 90% women in Pakistan face violence in the home. For the religious right and the dominating sections of the ruling elite, domestic violence is not a crime. For them, every man has the right to beat his wife, sister, daughter and even other female members of his family. Every one in three teenage girls is a victim of some kind of sexual abuse and torture. Every second girl is facing sexual harassment and unwanted sexual teasing.

The majority of domestic female workers are frequently subjected to rape and sexual abuse. Young girls between the age of 12 to 18 are especially likely to be subjected to rape and sexual abuse.

The majority of these girls remain silent because the fear of a social backlash against their families. If someone dares to speak out against such abuse, she ends up facing police brutality and false charges of offences like theft in the household. Rapes in police custody are also on the increase. Forty four cases of custodial gang rapes have been reported in the last two months.

One of the worst situations is that of the female workers in the brick-making industry. In the 21st Century, whole families are still forced to work in a kiln for a just few thousand rupees. This is slavery of the worst kind. The women and young girls are often subjected to rape and sexual abuse.

Only one third of women are registered on electoral roles for elections. In many areas of the country, women are simply not allowed to vote.

Islamic fundamentalism and women's rights

Islamic fundamentalists and the religious right consider the struggle for women's rights as a western conspiracy. For them, women are inferior to men, and their main duty is to please men.

The religious right allows horrific and brutal oppression of women to continue in the name of Islamic culture.

According to many well known Islamic scholars, these 'traditions and customs' are un-Islamic. But fundamentalists still defend them.

They include the practice of honour killing which allows male members of a family to kill female members for having sexual relations without marriage.

Vani is a custom in the semi-tribal districts of Punjab and North West Frontier Province under which girls are given in marriage to men of rival clans or tribes as a trade-off in deals to settle cases of murder and other blood feuds.

(Sisters and daughters of accused murderers are given to affected families to release their brothers and fathers.) The girls are then treated as slaves in the rival clan. Forced marriages are rife and Karo Kari is widely practiced. This is the custom of husbands or other male family members killing married or unmarried female members on allegations of illicit relations. (Sometimes they kill both people involved.)

Islamic fundamentalists never raise their voice against these cruel and inhuman traditions and customs. Love marriage (i.e. without parental consent) is still a sin and a crime according to the religious elite. These religious parties and fundamentalist groups are against the repeal of the 'Hudood' laws.

These were introduced by the vicious right wing military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, in 1979 to viciously curb women's rights. According to these horrific laws, a rape victim needs the evidence of four male witnesses in order to prove her claims in a court.

If she fails to provide this, she will be charged with adultery (sex with her own consent) which means imprisonment for between 5 and 15 years!

Scandalously, several thousand rape victims are languishing in prison because of these laws, which were made by a dictator in his own interests but in the name of Islam. According to a recent report compiled by a professor Shaheen, a minister during the period from 1999 to 2002: "95 % of cases registered under the Hudood Laws are false."

Hudood laws have proved to be an instrument of personal vengeance. 99% of women implicated in cases under Hudood laws were proven innocent in trials by superior courts, but junior courts sentenced them for many years on a totally wrong basis.

Recently the Federal Shariat (Islamic) Court issued instructions to all trial courts not to take cases involving women under these laws if they failed to prove rape according to their rules.

These self-styled "liberators of Muslims" are using religion to repress women and other sections of society. In their eyes, animals have more rights than women. At the recently held World Conference of the Islamic organisation Jamat-e-Islami in Peshawar, its head, Qazi Hussain Ahmad, accused the West of "Conspiring to destroy the very basis of the Muslim family unit in the name of women's liberation and gender equality in order to weaken and degrade our society.

Women's liberation is being promoted by those trying to subjugate the values of decency". This conference was

organised to deliberate on the wearing of the head scarf and the burqa. Many of the conference speakers blamed women for the crimes committed against them.

The rise of fundamentalism is a direct threat to women's rights as well as being a threat to workers' rights.

Women fighting back

More and more women in Pakistan are fighting back vigorously to end these slave conditions and cruel traditions. Poor rural women like Mukhtar Mai (a gang rape victim) defy all the odds to raise their voices against the atrocities committed against them. Other rape victims like Sonia Naz and DR. Shazia have stood up against the rotten system and its 'traditions'. (These cases were reported on the CWI website - socialistworld.net).

These women are challenging the male-dominated social and political system. But still it is not easy for women to raise their voice. This battle against feudalism, tribalism and fundamentalism is linked with the fight against the rotten system of capitalism.

This battle cannot be fought on an individual basis. Working class women need organisation and unity. This fight is also linked with struggle of the working class to overthrow the capitalist system and to replace it with socialism.

During the Pakistan Telecomm strike against privatisation and the recent teachers' struggle it was proved that female workers have great potential to organize and lead struggles. During the telecom strike women workers played an important role in organising in many places. Female workers remained solid throughout the strike. Women teachers are at the fore-front of the struggle against the government's policies.

Thousands of female teachers recently participated in an important protest demonstration. These struggles show the importance of women organised in the unions. Trade unions must include the demands of female workers in their programmes to attract the biggest number of potential members for the unions.

Role of the Socialist Movement

The Socialist Movement Pakistan (SMP) is fighting against all kinds of discrimination and exploitation against women. We are constantly campaigning against domestic violence and sexual harassment. Many activities have been organised to highlight these issues and to organise working class women. The SMP works mainly in working class communities and areas and its campaign against domestic violence has proved very successful.

SMP members are also involved in campaigning against the Hudood Laws. In 2005 we organised three protest demonstrations against them producing and distributing many posters and leaflets. We aim in 2006 to step up this work to new heights.

Rukhsana Manzoor, Socialist Movement
Pakistan

2. South Africa Gendercide in the so-called 'Age of Hope'

The 2006 budget drawn up by Trevor Manuel, the finance minister, has been lauded by the media and by the capitalists' 'advisers' throughout the country. One national newspaper proclaimed it to be, "The best budget ever". Another commentator praised the minister for not allowing the pending local government elections to cloud his good judgment, tempting him to spend the wind-fall R41 billion in revenue overruns on the poor to buy votes for the ruling party.

As in the previous budgets of Manuel's ten year reign, he has not disappointed the bosses and the rich and has continued to remain loyal to the neo-liberal practice of taking from the poor to give to the rich. The appallingly dismal increases of 10 rand (£1) for child support grants, 30 rand (£3) for foster care grants and 40 rand (£4) for pensioners stand in stark contrast to the massive increase in the amount of money the rich are allowed to move offshore annually. This has gone from R750,000 (£75,000) to R2m (£200,000) - amounts most working class people can only dream of.

All this shows utter contempt for the working class, the vast majority of whom are unaffected by the tax cuts over which so much fuss is being made. It is particularly deplorable when the budget is viewed from a woman's perspective. Women continue to be the most vulnerable in society - to HIV/Aids infection, to poverty and to lower paid employment and unemployment.

Health

What hope is there in President's Mbeki's policy called 'Age of Hope' for the women in South Africa who constitute more than half of the five million people living with HIV or Aids? They are at greater risk because of infection due to biological, social, cultural and economic factors. Yet, by the end of March 2005, only 42,000 of the 837,000 people estimated to require anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment were gaining access to the drugs. Moreover, one in four of those adults starting on ARVs, has a white blood cell count far below World Health Organisation recommended levels.

The roll out of ARVs has been painstakingly slow. This is due to inadequate physical infrastructure and insufficient resources for the recruitment of staff in the facilities providing such treatment. What is even more shameful, are the continuing confused messages from the National Department of Health. Lately, these include exaggerated and unfounded claims from dissidents, witch-doctors and all manner of quacks promoting nutrition as an alternative to anti-retrovirals. They particularly recommend vitamins and certain foodstuffs such as garlic, the African potato

and olive oil and have misled the public into believing that there is no need for medication to treat HIV/Aids.

According to the World Development Report of 1994, one of the main indicators of poverty is the inability to consume a basic quantity of clean water, unsanitary surroundings, the lack of the minimum energy requirements and extremely limited mobility or communications beyond residential settlements. The African National Congress-led government boasts that, since 1994, it has connected more than three million homes to electricity, supplied water to 90% of the population, done away with school fees for a select group of low-income schools and so on.

But the part privatisation and 'commodification' of basic services have served to entrench inequalities instead of removing them as people discover that they cannot afford to pay for the services they have been provided. This inability to access basic services forces on women even greater burdens in their role in the home - as the bearer of children and as primary care-giver for the old, and, in the age of the HIV/Aids pandemic, for more and more sick and dying relatives and their orphans.

Poverty, dependence and violence

A key determinant of whether people are living above or below the poverty line is employment. Women constitute 57% of the 40% unemployed in South Africa. If a woman is 'lucky' to be a recipient of any of the social security grants, she has to stretch it to feed and shelter the extended, unemployed family who do not get even this inadequate safety net. Therefore, what difference are tax breaks for women, when the majority of those in employment earn below the tax threshold?

Since they have no property, they do not benefit from the government's reduction in transfer costs and, if they are 'lucky' enough to have pensions, they will not have saved enough from a life-time of low wages to benefit from the tax breaks on retirement funds.

Seen through the eyes of women, the consequences of this and past budgets are an indictment of eleven years of democracy. This is especially so for working class women who, as a result of their dire economic circumstances, have become still more dependent on male partners. This exacerbates the power relations between men and women which in turn has contributed to an increase in exploitative practices and the shockingly high levels of violence against women.

The rate of sexual violence in South Africa, specifically rape, is ranked amongst the highest in the world. In the last year it has increased by 4% according to 'People Opposing

Women Abuse' (POWA). Disgracefully, POWA members were vilified by supporters in COSATU (the South African Trade Union Confederation) and the ANC Youth League of the former deputy president, Jacob Zuma, when they staged a demonstration during Zuma's trial for rape. This disgraceful behaviour of some COSATU members is the direct result of their leadership's bankrupt position on the squabbles in the ANC. It is an indication of the regression of consciousness and a setback for the once proud traditions of the union federation in fighting for the cause of women.

Only one in nine rape cases is reported in our country and of these only seven per cent end in convictions. The reasons for under-reporting include secondary victimisation from service providers, stigmatisation from society (like that from the Zuma supporters), a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system, poor investigation and plain intimidation. Above all, it is the result of the economic dependence of women on the men who make up most of the perpetrators. They are almost always well known by the victim in the relationship of husband, father, uncle or boss.

Protection?

More than 50 gender-related laws have been passed since 1994. They include changes to the Criminal Procedures Act, a strengthening of the ability of courts to refuse bail in rape cases, the Labour Relations Act which prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex and recognises the basic rights of vulnerable women on farms and in domestic labour, the Termination of Pregnancy Act legalising abortion within the first 12 weeks, the Domestic Violence Act recognising marital rape and other forms of abuse as well as the Maintenance Act supposedly facilitating the collection of payments from the father to maintain his children.

But all these laws spell out rights that have remained largely theoretical. The lack of enforcement is the direct result of the absence of the human and material resources needed to make these laws a reality for women.

As elsewhere in the world, violence against women is a growing trend which under conditions of globalisation and its related consequences in the intensification of the exploitation of the working class, is responsible for the

deaths worldwide of between one-and-a-half to three million women and girls each year. The Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) says this means "Violence against women causes every two to four years, a mountain of corpses equal to the Jewish Holocaust".

In war-ravaged countries mass rape has become institutionalised and used as a weapon of war. In Rwanda, ten years after the genocide, Amnesty International has estimated that women have been the victims of rape on a scale never seen in any other conflict with the full extent still not known.

The subjugation of women has been a cornerstone in the foundations of the capitalist system since its birth. Violence against women is an indictment of capitalism which offers women no hope under its framework. It is necessary to put an end to what has been referred to in the DCAF report as the slaughter of Eve.

Phantom equality for women

As the experience of South Africa shows, any advances under capitalism, for example in legislation outlawing discrimination, come into collision with the need of the system to intensify the exploitation of the working class with women bearing the brunt of the consequences. The elevation of women into senior positions in industry and government is still rare and offers no solution to the overwhelming majority of working-class women.

The claims that capitalism has come to terms with the idea of equality between the sexes collides also with the subordinate role that capitalism requires women to occupy in society. We see the perpetuation of the stereotyping of women through, for example, objectification in the advertising industry. The struggle for equality between the sexes must continue, but it must be based on the understanding that, unless the capitalist system is overthrown, the emancipation of women cannot be fully achieved. For working and poor women, socialism is not just a possibility but a necessity.

Sheri Hamilton, Democratic Socialist Movement

3. Venezuela

Women workers occupy Selfex factory

A group of around forty women have been leading a struggle for jobs and pay at the Selfex factory in the south east of Caracas for several weeks. The company, which makes women's underwear under the brand name LONY, ceased production in August 2005 when the owners claimed they could no longer afford to produce. They attempted to send home the 250 strong workforce, telling them they were on enforced annual leave.

The workers, 80% of whom are women, refused to accept this and insisted on their right to receive their pay, their meal tickets (a type of luncheon voucher) and their national insurance contributions.

The workers had been paid their wages up until mid-December but then the owners claimed bankruptcy. On 12 December they occupied the factory, placing a large padlock on the outer entrance door and controlling all access to the building. We visited the factory when we were in Caracas in February for the World Social Forum.

The women told us they had worked out a rota of shifts to ensure that the factory is occupied 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They had seen nothing of the owners since December. Many of the women have strong doubts as to whether the owners are really as broke as they claim. They recall the time of the bosses' lockout in 2003 and remember how the owners shut down the factory but the workforce insisted on coming to work. This time, the workers are just

as determined. They believe the owners are waiting for them to tire of the struggle and go home.

As Maria Teresa Bravo said, "This company has been going for 70 years". There are sewing machines here, vans to distribute the merchandise and above all there is a skilled workforce who want to work. All we need to start up production is cloth and cotton. We are all in our 30s, and 40s. We have families to feed. We are determined to fight for our jobs."

The women, all members of the UNT union, are low paid and have now had no income since December. Rosa Sojo explained: "We can't afford to buy the swimsuits and underwear we make. We are only paid the minimum wage."

The women feel that the existence of the Chavez regime has created an environment in which they feel more confident of raising their demands. However, despite their faith in the Chavez project, it is still important that the workers are organised independently and formulate concrete demands, such as a demand that the company open its books, so that the workers can see where the profits are going. Workers could also explore ways of restarting production and call for nationalisation under democratic workers' control.

Elisabeth O'Hara, Socialist Party (England and Wales)

4. Germany

Women organise against "Lidl" stores

For over a year the German service trade union Ver.di has been attempting through a campaign to set up workers' councils (Betriebsraete) in the retail chain, Lidl in order to improve conditions of employment. Women above all pay a high price for the exploitation and degradation at the discount stores - but they are putting up a fight.

"My head was spinning and I thought, "Oh God, my house, my children. If I give notice myself, I will not even get unemployment benefit." Then the controller dictated to me the text of the notice. In this situation I would have signed my own death sentence!" This is how a former employee of the profitable retail chain describes how she was forced to accept "voluntary" redundancy. This is not just an individual case - it is a whole system.

"System Lidl"

Voluntary redundancies or 'abolition contracts' are one way of getting rid of awkward workers. Mostly they are the ones who put up a fight against the terms of employment or who the company sees as having become too "expensive".

Pressure and unpaid additional work - this is how the retail chain brings down its costs. Unpaid overtime is rather the rule than exception. Lidl officially pays the national rates - only not for the actual hours worked. Regularly employees report that they have to carry out unpaid clearing work and preparation long before and after the shifts. This is also a result of a chronic lack of personnel.

There are practically no regular breaks. Even a short walk to the toilet is a luxury. Due to the tight work targets (40 scans per hour at the counter) it is hard to take any breaks at all. On top of that there are different forms of control and monitoring. Most notorious are the test buys by supervisors. Sometimes members of staff are also asked to undertake such test buys. Another form of control is the search for stolen goods in staff members' lockers, coats and bags, or even their cars. Video cameras have been installed without telling staff.

The Lidl enterprise

Everyone knows the name Lidl, but the enterprise itself remains largely a stranger. Behind the discount market

chain is the Schwarz-group. Information about the group structures or business accounts does not get published. In addition, the Schwarz-group has set up a network of 600 companies.

Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the Schwarz-group and Lidl are successful. The Schwarz group had a turnover of more than €36 billion in 2004, with the trend going upwards. The company is by now the biggest and most successful discount retail chain in Europe. In Germany, where Lidl employs 40,000 workers, only Aldi beats them.

Workers' councils? No, thanks!

In the stores, the mostly male branch managers conduct a hard regime. Most employees are women - at the tills up to 90%. This is only possible because there are no workers' representatives in most branches. Workers' councils only exist in seven of the 2,600 German branches of Lidl. The campaign by the trade union is seeking to change that. However, where employees attempt to set up workers' councils, the company responds very harshly. In a Munich branch, the organiser of the elections for the committee was sacked because she supposedly offended the acting branch manager. In the southern German town of Calw, Lidl even closed a profitable store because an active workers' council existed. Now employees and unions are preparing for the workers' council elections in the Spring. It is not certain whether this will be successful.

To the general public

The public sector union, Ver.di began the campaign at the end of 2004 with the publication called "The Lidl black book". In it the terms of employment at Lidl are described and the workers themselves get a chance to speak. This caused a wave of responses from Lidl employees and debate in the media. Since then the trade union has tried to engage with the employees by visiting Lidl branches and by

supporting staff with the setting up of workers' councils. In addition, they are organising so called customer weeks. These entail protest rallies outside the supermarkets, where the customers get informed about the background of the campaign and the terms of employment at Lidl.

Opposition is possible

There are few areas of work where it is more difficult to organise opposition than in the retail business, with many unorganised and temporary employees spread over many sites. There are seldom more than three permanent employees in one Lidl shop. Most women work part time, which splits the staff further. Because of the longer and longer store opening hours, to which unfortunately the trade union leaders agreed, the women spend more and more evening hours in the stores and it is difficult for them to find the strength for struggle.

Nevertheless, colleagues at other discount markets like Schleckler have shown that it is possible even under these conditions to set up workers' councils and to organise into the union. Their solidarity with Lidl colleagues is especially important, as they also take part in visiting and organising.

International day of solidarity

International Women's Day on 8 March is an important opportunity for wider and, above all, international protest. The international commercial union organisation UNI (Union Network International) plans to organise action at different European supermarkets. An internationalisation of the protests would be an important step towards increasing the pressure on the company. It would be especially important to include the Lidl workers from Belgium, Finland or Norway, who are already very well organised, and to raise the prospect of international strike action.

David Matrai, Berlin

5. Sweden

Campaigns and counter-campaigns on women's issues

The campaign activities up to the 8 March reached top speed. In all areas where Rättvissepartiet Socialisterna has a branch we will have demonstrations on this day. Sweden is considered to be a top nation when it comes to equality, but that says more about the poor state of equality in the world. One main issue in Sweden this year is, as it was last year, violence against women - the gender-based violence - which is increasing.

It is a fact that reporting to police has increased. Since 1995 the number of filed complaints for rapes has doubled; abuse and beating have increased by 20%. This year the increase in filed reports is to a large degree caused by the changed law, which regards more categories of assault as

rape. Because there are so many cases not reported, it is not easy to say if the increase is an expression of increased resistance from women or an actual increase of the violence.

There are two opposite trends. First there is a growing consciousness and some fight-backs. Several court cases where the perpetrator has been acquitted have provoked spontaneous protests. Old gender roles are being questioned in many ways. For example, fathers have increased their share of the parental leave. There are more women on leading bodies in society. In many schools there are 'equality groups' of students that fight discrimination.

Since the 1970s there has been an economic long-term trend of women going out to do paid work. This means

International Women's Day 2006

increased economic independence and collective strength. But at the same time, there are also the cutbacks -putting an even stronger burden on women's shoulders. 15 years of cuts in the public sector leave more unpaid welfare work to be done by families. The capitalists are making more profits than ever but they are not willing to offer any new jobs.

One of the most disgraceful examples is the multinational clothing giant, H&M. The clothes are made by child workers in Bangladesh. Their advertisements are so sexist that they have provoked a sabotage movement with feminist slogans being written across their posters. H & M's owner is Stefan Persson - one of the richest people in Sweden.

Last year he gave himself a share dividend to the value of KR359 million. That sum is equivalent to a year's wages for 10,000 workers in the stores. Those workers, mainly women, are among the lowest-paid in Sweden. The stress level is high and 10% of them have been sexually harassed by customers. But for the owners the profits are more important than fighting that kind of thing.

The situation in the family, in the public sector and on the labour market forces women to take part time jobs. One built-in contradiction in capitalism is that, at the same time that it still depends on unpaid labour in the family and the system's sex-based power order, it undermines the family. This is the consequence of production's need for flexibility, migration, women's entrance onto the labour market etc.

In one of many surveys, the Swedish LO (TUC) shows that 75% of women worked full time before maternity leave, but only 47% after. Men hardly reduce hours at all, from 94% before to 93% after the leave they take. The slaughter of the welfare state has created a harder climate in society. There are experts among the voluntary activists for the network of 130 shelters that every year give room to 20 000 women and children fleeing violent men.

(There are also 50 more shelters run by another network and councils). They estimate that violence against women in fact is increasing. Amnesty International in Sweden makes the same analysis.

When an attack-rape becomes known in one of the areas where Rättvisepartiet Socialisterna has a branch we try to react immediately against it. This year we organised a street protest in Umeå to answer a very dangerous rapist that has thrown the city into a state of fear. More than 100 demonstrated against the oppression of women and the need for women's struggle. We act to raise consciousness and to point out what needs to be done. Every rape has the effect of telling all women which gender has to be afraid of rapes.

This fear is used by the media. 70 percent of the articles on rape cases relate to attack rapes, but these are in reality only 12 percent of all the rapes. Eight out of ten raped women know the perpetrator. The impression can be given that a rape conducted in the relationship is OK; the patriarchal family is not questioned. Over a period of about five years there has been a change in women's freedom of movement. Now it is very common that women do not dare to walk alone when it is dark, which was not the case before.

We want to turn the fear into anger and point at the need for collective struggle, for women's fight back, and offer opportunities to get active. Demands that we put forward

include:- courses in self defence in all schools, universities and workplaces, programmes against sexual harassment in schools and workplaces, more money to schools to employ more teachers and nurses to have time and knowledge to fight harassment and gender roles, also to assist those with the lesbian, bi-sexual or transvestite perspective in education.

Our councillors in Umeå and Luleå have put forward resolutions in the council for better and cheaper public transport, improvement of lighting systems and park maintenance. We demand immediate council plans and measures for shelters and women's refuge houses in all wards. We also connect this with a demand for a joint trade union struggle to increase women's wages and for the right to have fulltime work. Now women in reality get only 71 percent of men's salaries. If part time work was transferred into fulltime it would still only be 83 percent. The RS councillors demand that the councils should raise the council employees' wages, something that all the other parties have rejected.

Fascists

Another reason for us to give a socialist fighting alternative is to take the initiative away from fascists. This scum is utilising peoples fears. They try to blame immigrants and are leafletting an area where an attack rape has taken place with the headline 'stop multi culture' and a picture of a Swedish woman who looks haunted. In reality the fascists stand for the worst form of women's oppression, where women are bound to the kitchen and stuck in baby production.

We always invite immigrant women's organisations to talk at the demonstrations. We go on the offensive against authorities and the Swedish social democratic government itself if they try to expel women to countries with brutal women oppressing politics, for example Iran, from where it is very hard for asylum seekers to get permission to stay.

The fascists also account for a big part of the huge increase of violent homophobia during recent years. Now two of them will be locked up in prison for four and a half years after an intervention from our party in the northern town of Piteå. We exposed those fascists and their crimes to the media and the public who created pressure on the trial so that they could not let them go free.

For seven years our youth organisation has been campaigning in the schools against sexual harassment in particular when girls are labelled as "whores" if they break with the cultural norm that rules. It can be anything from tight clothing, dumping a boyfriend, good grades, being noisy or having a definite opinion, being the subject of harassment or sexual violence.

No one can live exactly according to the norm; it is just there to limit the freedom of women. Girls that are 'whore'-labelled are given names such as 'dirty' or named after their private parts. Their integrity is questioned and they are assumed to be sexually 'available'. The bullying continues with a parallel lie that says that this is what she wants, which the management takes as an excuse for abandoning their responsibility. Whore labelling acts to limit the freedom of everyone in the school, not just the actual girl.

This campaign, called 'Refuse to be called a whore', is gaining huge support and is still needed. At the same time we are not let in to every school. as many principals think they will get problems with us. We give classes on the subject in the schools but of course we do not stop at talking. We always encourage the school students to organise, get active and demand more resources for the school.

'Feminist Initiative'

This autumn there are parliamentary elections in Sweden. There is a huge gap between the ordinary woman in the street and the establishment. People do not trust the politicians. In this vacuum a new party has been formed which is called the 'Feminist Initiative'. It is led by a quite popular ex-Left Party leader, Gudrun Schyman. It is a bit special that a feminist party can be launched, given that all the other seven parties in the parliament, except for the conservatives, for populist reasons already call themselves feminists. This development shows the potential for women's struggle.

When it was launched, the women's party had really good chances. But it has now missed the opportunity to grow and its leaders are rarely seen in media or on any activity. Last spring the right wing hit back with a counter-offensive, they started a debate through a program on state TV called "The gender war". The message was that all feminists hate men and that it is only special men - mentally ill or alcoholic - that beat their wives. The aim was to

change the focus away from the patriarchal structures in society to individuals, to hit the youthful challenging women's movement and to cut down the competitor that the establishment saw in the Feminist Initiative.

The radical feminists, who just do things like running shelters for women and have a weak understanding of class society, have not been able to answer this offensive. So the counter-offensive has had some effect. The Feminist Initiative has not been any help. Their leaders are totally absorbed by the idea of getting elected into the parliament and with their own careers. They dismiss any need for collective struggle from below therefore they are either bought over or swept away when the right wing politicians and the Social Democrats just breathe at them!

In the weeks leading up to 8 March it becomes clear again that even now the so-called feminists of the establishment are not going out on the streets to mobilise for International Women's Day. This day was launched by socialist women activists, based in the workers' movement, nearly 100 years ago. It is their successors who will continue the traditions. We say that this day must be filled with the spirit of struggle, not empty talk. We put forward a socialist alternative that points to the roots of women's oppression in class society which has to be overthrown and replaced with a socialist democratic society based on equal conditions for men and women.

Elin Gauffin, Rättvisepartiet Socialisterna

6. England and Wales

Real rights for women to choose (extract)

We are constantly told by the mainstream media that girls are outperforming boys at school and that young women now have more opportunities and choice than women of previous generations. New Labour tell us that we need 'reforms' in our services in order to endorse 'choice' for women. But what choice do young women really have in today's society?

'Right' to Education

Fees, means-testing for a grant and student debt estimated at £26,000 have made it increasingly difficult for working-class young people to go to university. Applications have dropped as a result and two third of students now have to work during their degrees. These attacks disproportionately affect women who are paid less than their male counterparts. They often enter part-time work because of family responsibilities and therefore take longer to pay back top-up fees and student debt.

It could take a woman with two children twenty years to pay off her student debt, five more years than male col-

leagues with the same qualifications and job. This is only providing she manages to secure a position with an annual wage of £36,000!

Female students are also less likely to enter subjects like finance, computer science or engineering - subjects linked to some of the highest paid jobs in Britain today. Female dominated courses are often seen as non-profitable for big business and do not attract private funding, which is the new funding system under New Labour.

Women with children also find it next to impossible to enter higher education. Universities do not always provide childcare that covers all the hours needed by parents. This hardship is worse during school holidays, where student parents are expected to study and sometimes work as a result of cuts in benefits and grants. Universities find millions of pounds however to fund schemes increasing its prestige on the market and attracting private investment.

We say no to top up fees and student loans. Free education and a living grant for all students. Free, quality childcare for students which covers all the hours parents need, including holidays.

Sexism

Working class women, including students, can find themselves victims of the sex industry which is exploiting this impoverished and oppressed layer in society and objectifying their bodies. 'Escort jobs' have been advertised in local students' unions putting female students at even higher risk of sexual harassment and rape.

These problems are made even worse by students unions who use sexist advertising and promote events such as beauty contests and 'Pimps & Prostitutes' nights to sell more alcohol.

This is despite the fact that the National Union of Students boasts about its 'pro-choice' policy for women and that 'the place of a woman is in education and a trade union'.

Three quarters of female students do not feel safe walking on their campus after dark. Yet with lack of adequate reasonable priced transport, many students are forced to walk in areas where they feel unsafe.

The images presented of women are promoting sexist attitudes, reinforcing the objectification of women, portraying us and our bodies as commodities for the 'free' market and contributing to the overall oppression of women, including violence against women.

The 'right' to choose what to wear

Stereotypes as to how women should look and dress are to the direct benefit of big business. All mainstream sources of information, especially the media, promote the latest appearance and diet trend which often targets women and as a result boosts the enormous profits of the diet and beauty industries.

This is contributing to health problems, both physical and psychological, with 85% of women worrying about their bodies every day, only 1% of young women being completely satisfied with their bodies and many experiencing eating disorders.

On the one hand, we are told that women now have 'choice' and are sexually 'liberated', but we are also told what to wear, how to look, and to accept sexism, discrimination and oppression. Women should have the right to wear whatever they choose, whether this is wearing the latest fashionable dress or jeans and a hoodie. Women should also have the right to wear the hijab or not, as they and no one else decides. (See CWI publication on the hijab controversy of two years ago on socialistworld.net. Ed.).

Full article for the 'Socialist' by Zena Awad. See web-site of Socialist Party (England and Wales): www.socialistparty.org.uk

7. Belgium Radicalisation of workers affects young women

The political situation in Belgium has changed a lot in the past year. The government has been forced to launch a big attack on the rights of workers, especially on their pension entitlement. In the summer they announced that workers in Belgium were taking up their pension too quickly. Because of the sharp rise in the ageing of the population everybody would have to work longer to sustain our social security system, otherwise it would collapse.

The other side of the story is that Belgian workers are on average more productive than on a European level; when they take early retirement they are already worn out. Also, for the past twenty years, in order to stimulate the economy and job creation, the different governments have given the bosses enormous reductions in the amount they have to pay to social security and to taxes. By lowering the amount available for the work-force when they retire, this amounts to an indirect attack on wages. Today more than a million people are unemployed or underemployed in Belgium. The only thing that changed is the profits, which have been rising significantly in the last few years.

These proposals meant that the leadership of the unions was confronted with enormous anger from the rank and file.

They were pushed far further than they ever wanted to go. For the first time in twelve years, Belgian society was confronted with a general strike - two in one month actually - with one of the biggest demonstrations of workers seen in years. Thousands marched into the streets. This resistance was also reflected in a growing hatred and anger towards the Social Democrats, who have been in government for almost twenty years. Union leaders are now forced to put in question their relationship with them and with the Christian Democrats. There is a growing, critical minority among the working class who are looking for an alternative.

Women workers hit hard

The neo-liberal offensive has for years worsened the situation for Belgian workers, especially female workers who have been far more touched by unemployment, attacks on benefits and underemployment. 40% of working women now work part time. Single parent families are hard hit by poverty; 80% of single parent families with a female parent are officially poor. More and more women are found in very flexible, low paid and insecure jobs.

And then there is the pensions question. In the '90s a

decision was taken by the government that women would also have to have a career of 45 years instead of 40 years as before. This would go up in stages and in 2007 everyone in Belgium will have to work for 45 years to get a full pension. A lot of women work part time and often lose a few years when the children come along as child care would easily cost you half or more of your wages. So already a lot of women were not able to assure a full pension for themselves. Now it will be almost impossible for women to get it.

The recently proposed "Generation Pact" which led to the two general strikes in October last year, was an attempt to break the early retirement system (among others). The new arrangement on early retirement (pre-pension) means that the big majority of women - 70% according to the unions - will not be able to get it. The strikes forced the government to make concessions.

A big one is new negotiations on the jobs that would get exceptional pre-pension arrangements - so-called 'hard jobs' - and on periods in which you did not work being 'equalised periods', counted in the career years. So it is possible that the huge figure for women not qualifying will go down. Definitely some professions in the health sector, like nurses, will count as 'hard jobs'. It is clear however that these new negotiations will not save all women's pre-pension rights.

Radicalisation

The strikes and the growing radicalisation have had an effect on working women. For a lot of young female workers it was their first time on a picket line, in an open confrontation with their bosses and the government. We

always said that in the process of taking part in the class struggle, female workers would start to question their own lives and the difficulties they face. This process is already underway. For example, the World March of Women took place also in October last year. It is usually dominated by the bourgeois and petty bourgeois feminists, but this time we saw a huge presence of trade union women, who formed two very animated and combative blocks in the demonstration, carrying placards with demands on pensions, wages, and broader social demands.

We are organising an event on International Women's Day aimed at attracting a new layer of radicalised women to the ideas of socialism. We aim to have 100 present. The main theme is "The emancipation of women: victims of 25 years of neo-liberalism". There will be workshops about how to fight violence in the family and a report of the Campaign Against Domestic Violence with Sinead from Scotland speaking.

Recently, in our anti-fascist work, especially around the demonstrations against the NSV - the unofficial student group of the Vlaams Belang - and the economic congress of the Vlaams Belang, we produced an article on their programme on women. It involves a serious attack on women's independence, wages, social rights and reproductive rights.

We will also have a campaigning day (all the branches separately) on the 8th of March, having stalls around this theme at universities, in busy streets, at stations. Where we've got the strength, we will also try and mobilise at workplaces where a lot of women work (hospitals, supermarkets) to sell our paper and give out leaflets.

Marijke Descamps, LSP/MAS (CWI) Belgium

8. Australia Socialists campaigning for women's rights

In Australia, over the last year the Socialist Party (CWI Australia) has concentrated its political activity for working women in Victoria on fighting against the Industrial Relations legislation which will impact on the living standards of every Australian woman. Marisa Bernadi, who is an organiser with the National Union of Workers, has been campaigning in her union for a real fight back against the legislation. In April 2005, a 'Unite' - Youth March in Melbourne against McJobs, casualisation and attacks on education and training mobilised 500 young people - the majority of whom were young women.

Throughout the last year we have been campaigning through the SP Councillor in the Yarra City Council, Steve Jolly, for better childcare on public housing sites in that area. The demands have focused on pressuring Yarra Council to provide more childcare places and for the local council to put pressure on the Victoria State Government as well. There was a successful public meeting on this issue

which over 250 people attended. Steve has also organised a resolution that requires the council to employ only workers on Enterprise Bargaining Agreements. This is in direct opposition to the Federal Government's plans for increasing casualisation.

The right to choose

Over the last month, there has been a new public debate over women's fertility which has shown the need for vigilance to protect the existing rights of women. In February 2006, there was a victory when the Federal parliament passed legislation to allow the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to decide if the so called abortion pill - RU486 - can be used in Australia.

The 'pro-life' groups did not want this legislation passed. They would rather support the rights of a foetus than a woman's right to choose an alternative to an abortion to ter-

minate a pregnancy. They do not care if a woman's life circumstances enable her to cope with an extra mouth to feed - a child to raise and clothe. These groups are not on the streets protesting against the Liberal Coalition Government's neo-liberal policies to cut social welfare and privatise all state assets. These same people would rather a child be raised into poverty than provide decent social benefit support for the mother. They do not support providing state-owned housing - the only alternative to making a woman pay for private rental accommodation and move at the whim of investors!

Affordable housing and childcare are moving out of reach for ordinary Australians. A recent study by the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 'Australia's Welfare, 2005', has shown that 883,000 lower-income families and singles are suffering from housing stress. They spend anywhere from 30% to more than 60% of their weekly incomes on housing. Of the 1.7 million Australians struggling to afford to keep a roof over their heads, more than two thirds are in private rental accommodation.

In the last year alone the costs of child care for working women has risen by over 10%. The government's solution to this issue is to allow private companies such as 'ABC Learning' to increase their fees and to pay back to the user from tax-payers' money 30% of the childcare costs. 'ABC Learning' owns over 700 centres in Australia and the USA and controls one-fifth of the 'market'. In fact by their new 'benefit to families', the Liberals are allowing the likes of ABC to increase fees and are using public money to increase their profit margin. The Liberals do not want to provide publicly-owned childcare, believing that anything is suitable for profit, even providing care for children.

When women get a job it is often poorly paid and in casual work. Many women and families are barely coping now, they will be suffering even more under the new Industrial Relations laws, which cut peoples basic wages, conditions and rights to join a union.

Our programme

The Socialist Party in Australia calls for real choice for women in all areas of their daily lives: in the workplace, home and in relationships and in control of their fertility. We campaign on how to change social conditions as well as political ones because achieving social goals frees women to engage in changing society. We call for women to be given real choices. Without the basics there is no real choice: -

We include in our programme:

- Access to free fertility treatments and free contraceptives.
- Access to timely, free and safe abortions. Access to free RU486 pills. Access to good quality, not-for-profit childcare centres.
- For the Trade Union Movement to put up a real fight to overthrow the Industrial Relations legislation.
- Defend social welfare payments by fighting the cuts, especially those impacting on women, such as cuts to single parents' payments.
- Support and defend affordable, good quality public housing with good community resources, including refuges for women wanting to leave abusive and violent relationships.

Samantha Ashby, Socialist Party

9. USA

Women of today and yesterday

Have you ever thought what your mother's life was like, or your grandmother's? What would it be like to live that life? Expected to look after your family, perhaps you would also work for wages outside the home. But you would never receive equal credit, money or respect. On some level you were expected to hand over your authority to someone else, someone male. Sort of like the Jim Crow south in the days when white teenagers addressed an adult black man by his first name or as "boy".

The recent death of Betty Freidan, a leading figure of the American feminist movement of the '60s, was a cause for the bourgeois media to reflect on the changes in the lives of US women over the past four decades. She had been co-founder of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL). The press recounted various anecdotes from Ms. Freidan's life such as the comments that were made to her when she graduated with honours from a prestigious university: "Betty, a woman wants to marry a doctor, not be one".

Yet by 2001, nearly 46% of first year medical students in the United States were female. Comparable strides have been made in most of the middle class professions. But how well are women doing, really?

In 2003, during the first year of the occupation of Iraq, US poverty rates grew for the third straight year and women were more likely to be poor than men. Inequality levels in 2005 have gotten even worse. Since the year 2000, 5.4 million more people, including 1.4 million children, have been added to the poverty rolls.

Equal work with unequal pay

Although the United States has had equal pay laws for women since 1963, largely a by-product of the civil rights and labour movement struggles, 43 years later women are still paid 77 cents for every dollar a man receives. African-American women and Latinas earn 70 cents and 58 cents less respectively. During the course of her working life, an average 25 year-old woman will lose more than \$523,000

socialists fight women's oppression worldwide

to unequal wage rates. If single working mothers earned the same wages as men, the poverty rate would be cut in half from 25.3% to 12.6%. Women's incomes would rise 17% on average. Married women would also help to boost their combined income by 6% and the poverty rates of married families would decrease from 2.1% to 0.8%.

Poverty statistics are calculated by gross income, not by net expenditures. If child care costs alone, averaging \$340 a month for employed mothers, were factored into the government calculations, many more women would be considered poor. The unequal wage differential combined with disproportionately greater child care and family responsibilities, results in more women falling into poverty, and more easily than men.

Bush sharpens the knife for women and the poor

Since Bush has been temporarily rebuffed in his plan to privatise the social security programme, he now wants to drastically cut Medicaid - the government sponsored health program for the extremely destitute. Bush's plan is to cut \$20 billion in the next five years leading to the goal of \$60 billion over the next ten years. These cuts would be equal to cutting care provisions for 1.8 million poor children or 350,000 elderly. The vast majority of the poorest who rely on government medical assistance are women and children. 70% of adult Medicaid recipients are women. Medicaid pays for more than 30% of all child-birth care in the US and one in four children have their only health insurance through Medicaid. In the absence of a national health service, 50 million poor Americans use Medicaid as their sole access to health care.

There is no mainstream political party that has the will to oppose Bush's agenda. Democrats make loud noises and threaten to filibuster each time Bush introduces a new round of cuts, increases the military budget or appoints reactionary anti-abortion rights judges to the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, without a fighting class struggle opposition, the capitalist system succeeds in moving the goal

posts each time a little further away from the working class and poor.

A campaigning socialist organisation

The US section of the CWI, especially our women comrades, have played a role in defending reproductive rights and safeguarding abortion clinics - a role quite separate from that of middle class feminism. We come armed with our own programme of national health care, child care, a housing programme, decently paid jobs and opposition to war.

We understand war as a woman's issue. We make the links between the war in the Middle East and the domestic war in the US on the working class and poor, especially women. At times we have played a key role in pushing out the military recruiters from high schools and picketing the recruiting stations in working class communities, in order to make the military's position uncomfortable and untenable.

We are involved in a grassroots campaign to stop big business from appropriating public park facilities in the South Bronx, which is the poorest Congressional district in the country. This effort has brought us into contact primarily with African American and Hispanic women who are fighting to stop Walmart and the Yankee sports stadium complex from devouring working class communities in the service of real estate gentrification.

A socialist alternative in the 'Belly of the Beast'

It is vital that capitalism is defied and opposed in the wealthiest and most unrestrained capitalist country in the world. Our answer to war, unending attacks on the quality of life, the lowering of living standards and the growth of inequality promoted by capitalism is to build a socialist alternative. Our major objective is to recruit and train the future leadership of the socialist troops who will shake capitalism to its foundations. Many of the most vital forces in this battle will be women.

Margaret Collins, Socialist Alternative

A world of violence against women - the hard facts. Compiled from United Nations and other reports

More than 135 million girls and women world-wide have been the victims of genital mutilation (female circumcision). A further two million are at risk of being subjected to this practice every year.

At least one in three women - or up to one billion - have been abused or forced to have sexual intercourse during their lifetime.

The perpetrator is usually a family member or somebody the woman knows.

In the USA, one woman is abused every 15 seconds, usually by her partner.

In Russia, every day 36,000 women are abused by their husbands or partners.

Around 70% of female homicide victims are killed by their male partner.

In Kenya, it is reported that more than one woman every week is killed by a male partner.

In Spain, every 5 days one woman is killed by her male partner.

Rape is the worst form of sexual abuse.

It often leads to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/Aids. Only a fraction of rapes are being reported and fewer still lead to court trials and convictions. One in five women globally will be a victim of rape or attempted rape during her lifetime.

In South Africa two rapes take place every minute.

In the USA one woman is raped every 90 seconds.

Violence against women in armed conflicts has reached epidemic proportions.

Mass rapes are systematically used as an instrument for terror.

In Bosnia/Herzegovina 20,000 - 50,000 women were raped during the civil war of 1992-95.

The bulk of refugees and people forcibly removed from their homes are women and children.

**These facts alone constitute millions of reasons to battle against class rule and oppression!
Join us in the CWI and in the fight for a socialist world!**

To contact us or find the CWI in your country:-

e-mail cwi@worldsoc.co.uk

web-site: www.socialistworld.net

Committee for a Workers' International, PO Box 3688, London, E11 1YE

Telephone: ++4420 8988 8760

Fax: ++ 4420 8988 8793