

## International Women's Day 2011

# Women and the fightback

International Women's Day comes at a time of women's struggles against exploitation and harassment in Asia and Latin America, strikes and demonstrations against cuts in Europe and of course mass movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya and elsewhere.

To mark the 100th anniversary of the first International Women's Day demonstrations, JANE JAMES and SARAH WRACK examine some aspects of the cuts to jobs and services in Britain and how to struggle to defeat them and to end the oppression of women.

### Build a mass movement against cuts and for genuine equality for women

**T**HE CON-DEM cuts, if realised, will impoverish millions of working class people but women and children will be disproportionately hit. However, the Socialist Party would not propose sharing out the misery by demanding that men suffer more! Working class men and women need to unite to fight all the cuts.

In anti-cuts campaigns around the country, women who face losing their jobs have been protesting and organising against the cuts. When the mass student movement against rising fees and cuts to further and higher education budgets was at its height at the end of 2010, the large number of young women taking part led one newspaper to carry the headline: "rage of the girl rioters".

In the past, big victories for the women's movement have tended to be won at times of generalised struggles of the

working class. In the 1960s and 70s, taking inspiration from movements against the Vietnam war and for civil rights in America as well as strikes and protests in the UK, women won massive legal concessions such as the Equal Pay and Abortion Acts.

The confidence and momentum built up by the gigantic industrial and community battles ahead should be used in the same way to push for improvements to women's rights and lives. Most importantly we must build a mass united campaign of working class women and men against the Con-Dem government and its swingeing cuts.

- Build a united mass movement to defeat all the cuts
- Anti-cuts campaigns must campaign against all cuts, including those that particularly impact on women



Hundreds of thousands of women workers will lose their jobs if the cuts are carried through. photo Senan

### Cameron's big society con

**D**ESPITE ADVANCES in both the economic position of and social attitude towards women, they are still the main care providers in the majority of families. Cameron's so-called 'big society' will only reinforce this. Government ministers, in justifying the cuts facing all types of care from pre-schools to homes for the elderly, have said that 'social care is a responsibility for everyone'.

It will be women in the main who pick up the slack for the 46 councils who say they will be forced to massively cut back on home care for the elderly. And it will be women who will have to provide the extra care lost by disabled relatives because of plans to cut the Disability Living Allowance.

The Con-Dems are even cutting tax relief for childcare vouchers which will push up the cost of childcare, meaning that, because of low pay, more women will be forced to stay home instead of working.

The cuts also mean that women have less choice in when and whether to have children. Independent advisory groups on teenage pregnancy and sexual health have already been axed. Maternity, midwifery and abortion services are also at risk because of NHS cuts.

The government is even making cuts to the Sure Start maternity grant and health in pregnancy grant which will leave many feeling that they are financially unable to have children.

- For high quality childcare to be available to all
- Defend the NHS! No cuts to maternity and other health services
- For women to have full control over when and whether they have children. Protect and improve abortion services. Fight to defend and extend financial and other support for women during and after pregnancy

### End violence against women

**T**HE LATEST crime figures showed an overall reduction in the amount of crime reported and yet in the last year alone, serious sexual crimes have increased by 8%.

With many councils looking at ludicrous and dangerous money saving schemes such as turning off street lights, this will only increase.

Services for women and children facing domestic violence across the country are under threat. For example, Devon County Council proposed to cut all funding for domestic violence support services. Following angry protests, the council has now announced that these services will continue into 2011 but with only half the funding. With fewer refuges more women will have nowhere to escape from violent relationships and will face attack and even murder.

The £600 million cuts to legal aid in-

clude a massive reduction in the support available for divorce cases which will also make escaping violent relationships more difficult.

- No to closure of domestic violence support services. Increase and improve the services to help those women affected by domestic violence. Anti-cuts groups and trade unions must campaign to save existing refuges as well as open new ones
- A mass building programme of decent, affordable social housing to make sure women have somewhere to go should they choose to leave a violent relationship
- No cuts to legal aid. Increase threshold for legal aid so that all women can access for divorce cases. No to enforced mediation

### The Campaign Against Domestic Violence

THE CAMPAIGN Against Domestic Violence (CADV) was set up in 1991 by members of the Militant (the predecessor of the Socialist Party). It aimed to increase awareness of domestic violence, fight for legal reform and the release of women imprisoned for defending themselves against violent partners and campaign for more resources and services for women experiencing violence and abuse.

A number of trade unions affiliated to the campaign and worked with CADV to bring the horrors of domestic violence out into the open. Guidelines were negotiated in a number of workplaces and assisted many victims by, for example, allowing time off and if possible transferring the victim to a job in another town away from the perpetrators.

Although gains were made by CADV and other groups, over two women a week are still killed by their current or ex-partners (the same level as in 1991) and a quarter of all women will experience domestic violence in their lifetimes.

### End the pensions rip-off

**N**EARLY A quarter of single female pensioners live in poverty. Many women have gaps in their employment due to having children or caring for elderly or disabled family members. Because of the way pensions are calculated this means that they often retire on a lower pension.

Also, women are likely to be more dependent on the state pension than men as they are less likely to have an occupational pension.

Now the government is raising the age at which women can claim the state

pension from 60 to 66. This process will be sped up so that women who are now 56 or 57 will have to work a further one or even two years before they are eligible.

- No rise in the state pension age! For an immediate 50% increase in the state pension as a step towards a rate that is really enough to live on
- For coordinated trade union action to oppose cuts to hard-earned occupational pensions as well as opposing raising the state pension age

### A living wage for all

**I**N TERMS of earnings, women were disadvantaged even before the recession and the onslaught of cuts from the Con-Dems.

Last year was the 40th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act but women are still paid an average of 15.5% less than men. This is equivalent to women working for no wages after 2 November every year. And now the government has abandoned legislation to force employers to even 'monitor' the pay gap!

At the 2010 Equal Pay conference women's groups and representatives from unions discussed how business could help to close the pay gap. But big business is a big part of the problem! After all, the bosses gain financially by paying half the workforce lower rates.

At the conference Dave Prentis, general secretary of the public sector union, Unison, which represents thousands of female workers, highlighted the situation and said: "the time it takes for women to challenge unequal pay is a major hurdle. We have members who have sadly died in the time it takes to resolve an equal pay case."

But in 1999, Unison signed up to the single status agreement with council bosses. Supposedly, single status would ensure equal pay for equal work but, as we warned at the time, it has actually resulted in some workers, both male and female, losing pay!

Limited though it is, the Equal Pay Act only came about because women trade unionists took industrial action. Most famous were the Dagenham sewing machinists who forced the Ford car giant to increase their wages significantly.

But their strike was followed by many more in other industries. It's that sort of action that we will need again to force the government and bosses to act on low pay and pay inequality.

- Close the pay gap. Trade union struggle to increase the minimum wage to at least £8 an hour, without exemptions, as an immediate step towards £10 an hour
- Ensure women have access to all areas of work

### Defend welfare rights

**W**ELFARE BENEFIT payments, which were inadequate even before the cuts, will now be scaled back by £18 billion, leaving many low-paid women with less income and access to services. Lone parents, 90% of whom are women, will be among the hardest hit by the cuts - losing 11.7% of their net income.

94% of those who receive child benefit are women. Child benefit payments will be frozen at the current level for three years which, taking into account inflation, is in reality a cut. It will also be stopped in some instances.

Yvette Cooper, Labour shadow welfare secretary, commissioned a 'gender audit' of the Con-Dems' June 2010 emergency budget.

It revealed that "of the budget's £8.1 billion net personal tax increases and benefit cuts, an estimated 72% will be paid by women and 28% by men." But in government Labour cut income support for lone parents, opening the way for the Con-Dems.

The Fawcett Society, which campaigns for equal rights and pay for women, recently forced the government to admit that they did not carry

out an assessment of how the budget will affect women. But even then the judge did not grant a judicial review of the budget!

While such research certainly highlights the callous nature of this government, in and of themselves, facts will not be sufficient to force the government to reverse the cuts.

And Yvette Cooper cannot hide from the fact that the Labour Party says it would have had to make cuts - albeit over a longer period - which of course would have impacted disproportionately on women too.

- Save child benefit as a universal right! It is a responsibility for society as a whole to assist with the costs associated with raising children
- Reject parents being made to look for work from when their child is five
- No to the universal credit - a cover for massive cuts to support for the most vulnerable
- For the right to decent benefits, education, training or a job without compulsion

### Job creation not job cuts

**W**OMEN MAKE up two-thirds of the public sector workforce. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development estimates that 725,000 public sector jobs will be lost due to cuts.

Those who then look for jobs in the private sector will be faced with the average pay for part-time jobs being £6.78 an hour compared to £9.34 in the public sector.

A number of trade union leaders are not conducting a battle to stop the cuts. In many areas it has been left to individual union branches to fight the cuts instead of organising the national action and coordination between unions that is needed.

- Defend every job! For a one-day public sector strike against cuts
- Local councils should refuse to do the Tories' dirty work and set needs budgets which make no redundancies. Where they don't, anti-cuts and socialist candidates should stand against them
- For investment into job creation schemes that train people in socially useful work and pay trade union agreed rates of pay
- When companies threaten jobs and pay cuts we demand that they open the books to show where the money has gone

### A socialist alternative

**T**HE SOCIALIST Party stands for a democratic socialist society. This is the only way to fully and permanently free both women and men from the limitations and inequality of capitalism.

It is not 'natural' or 'inevitable' that women earn less and carry the major part of the domestic load. The oppression of women is rooted in class society. The way that capitalism is organised and structured - in particular the role that the family has played and still plays as an economic and social unit - perpetuates and reinforces women's oppression.

When ordinary people talk about 'family' they mean real individuals - parents, children, partners. However, under capitalism the family is also a social and economic unit based on the dependence of the 'non-productive' members of the household on an individual wage earner (traditionally the man). The family plays an ideological and an economic role. Among other things it is used to reinforce the idea of bearing personal responsibility for society's ills.

When Tory prime minister Maggie Thatcher famously said that "there is no such thing as society", only the family and individuals, she also said that the family was a "building block". In doing so she summed up the attitude of capitalism to the family. Thatcher, like the Tories today, believed that it was the duty of the family to bear the burden of looking after children, the sick and the elderly.

Conveniently, this provides an excuse to decimate public services. A greater part of the burden is then dumped on individual families - primarily on women. The Tories would like us to return to the conditions of Victorian capitalism when no welfare state existed. However, they will not get away with it. Today, largely as a result of their increased role in the workplace, women are in a far stronger position than in the Victorian era. Women

can play a vital role, alongside men, in defeating the government's cuts.

However, it is also necessary to go further and fight for a society run in the interests of the millions, rather than the billionaires. We are fighting for a socialist society where the means of producing wealth would be transferred from an unelected elite, concerned only with making profit, to the democratic control of working people.

That would enable economic measures to be taken which would immediately do an enormous amount to improve the position of women. Measures such as decent wages and jobs for all, free high-quality childcare, free universal education, good housing, widely available inexpensive high-quality restaurants and other measures - would enormously ease the situation.

Longer term, the change in economic relations, the abolition of class divisions and the construction of a socialist society based on democratic involvement and cooperation would also change social relations. Society would move away from hierarchies and the oppression and abuse of one group by another. Human relations would be freed from all the muck of capitalism.

- For a new mass workers' party to provide an alternative to the big business politicians
- Nationalise, under democratic workers' control and management, the top 150 banks and companies to provide money for desperately needed investment into public services
- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, allowing everyone to play a full role in the running of society



photo Suzanne Beishon

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