

# Women fight back!

Mon, 01/05/2006 - 22:00

Women fighting back against globalisation, war and social oppression - what kind of women's movement do we need?

Resistance to the negative effects of globalisation, particularly through the conscious anti-capitalist movement, has shown that we can unify against a common enemy. While much of the process of globalisation has been to unify the process of exploitation around the globe, there is no doubt that some sections of society are more acutely affected than others. In particular, the rural and urban poor of the least developed countries, the migrants and refugees from poverty and war, and the masses of newly unemployed in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Across all the areas, and in the rich countries, it is women whose lives have changed the most, who suffer the greatest hardship, and who are absolutely key to resisting global capitalism.

Women have been drawn more and more into workplaces by globalisation. This is positive insofar as it gives women more economic independence, reduces their isolation in the home and draws new fighters for freedom into the struggle. But, as always, capitalism does not do this for the benefit of women workers. It does it because it believes women will work for less and will continue to look after children and the home for free. As in the 19th century in Europe, it is also only too willing to use child labour to make its super-profits.

The increase of women's work largely in part-time and casual jobs goes hand in hand with a neoliberal attack on the service sector. This forces women to look for work that fits around their domestic commitments, while the availability of secure full time jobs has reduced. Overall globalisation has changed the form but maintained the essence of women's oppression: their continued responsibility for household and family.

All across the world, women are involved in historic struggles against the capitalist system: in Colombia, women have blocked highways to a protest against neo-liberal globalisation and to demand that the Free Trade Area of the Americas be rejected; in Cuba, they demand reform of monetary policies which create poverty and inequality; in Ghana, they are fighting for the right to property and secure family life; in Palestine and Iraq, they are fighting against the brutal force of occupation.

Other important issues raised through struggle by women are around immigration and the accompanying violence in El Salvador, as well as trafficking and the rights of migrants by women in Greece. The struggle in Indonesia against the brutality of sweatshop labour, with young women organising in unions to challenge the right of the bosses to work them to death has inspired other struggles from Mexico to China.

Developing an international network of women facing oppression on many different fronts - to coordinate our struggles and come up with a concrete plan of action - is absolutely necessary in order to challenge our oppression. Women have shown that they are willing to fight for a world free of oppression, exclusion, discrimination, intolerance and violence. We, as revolutionaries, are willing to fight for such a world - and

have a strategy to do so. We don't believe that the world's wealthy are going to just hand over their profits and renounce their old ways to make a better world. We are not dreaming of a utopia, but are waging a political struggle against the problems today and building a strategy of how we will win the struggles of tomorrow.

Sexism, like racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression, is a tool used by the capitalist system. The capitalist rulers maintain the level of exploitation by playing one section of society against the other. For example, in the family the sexist division of labour means women are expected to carry out a host of domestic duties and childcare. Men clearly benefit from this, which is why many men continue to defend their privileged role in the family, and some will use violence and abuse to retain their power over their wives and daughters. But the real beneficiaries are the capitalists who effectively use this system to get women to carry out the reproduction of labour by raising the next generation of workers for nothing. That is why bourgeois society does everything to maintain the patriarchal family. While men also dominate many spheres of power and influence in society, such as the workplace and political and judicial structures, it is class relations in society that explains how exploitation works, not gender. It is the capitalist class that exploits working class men and women and this class is made up of women as well as men.

All women do not suffer the same level of oppression under capitalism - this idea blurs the class divide and the socio-economic structures underpinning capitalism. Although even bourgeois women suffer sexism and often legal and economic oppression relative to men of their class, they remain representatives of the ruling class and will generally act in the interests of that class. A young women worker in a sweatshop factory in a Mexican maquiladora has more in common with a fellow male worker than she does with Hilary Clinton or with the 'first lady' of any country.

### **Fight for a working class women's movement**

This has consequences for how you build a movement against women's oppression. The struggle for women's liberation is widely identified with feminism, since workers' organisations have failed consistently to take up the issues. But can feminism lead to women's liberation? Since feminism locates women's oppression solely in the relationship between men and women, separate from class society, it promotes the strategy of women of all classes joining together to fight their oppression. This is a dead end, because ruling class women do not share our interest in fighting the low pay, poor housing and lack of access to healthcare that cause millions of women to suffer every day. The founders of the Suffragette movement in Britain suspended their demand for the vote for women after the outbreak of the First World War. They put their allegiance to their class above their solidarity with their sisters.

Rather than a cross-class feminist movement led by Hilary Clinton, women need to build a movement based on working class and poor women who share a common enemy, global capitalism.

Such a movement needs to fight for:

? Equal rights for women: rights to vote, rights to work, rights to education, unrestricted rights to participate in all public and social activity.

? Equal pay for equal work. This is still beyond the reach of millions of women because work tasks have been redefined to avoid it. We fight for its implementation.

? Permanent contracts for part-time workers with full protection from early dismissal and entitlement to sick and holiday pay and to decent pensions.

? Free high quality childcare, available every day and whenever parents need it and funded by taxing the

rich. With the deregulation of working hours, the provision of flexible 24-hour childcare has become an even more urgent need so that women can work, and participate in social and political activity.

? Free contraception and abortion, on demand, regardless of age. In many countries there is a moral backlash against women's rights, led by the evangelical Christians that run the White House - abortion clinics are under attack; services are cut while 'family values' are promoted to put the burden of care back on the shoulders of women. Contraception and abortion must be defended against attacks by right wing forces and access to these must be free, on demand and regardless of age.

? No to discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. We should fight for anti-discrimination laws, campaigns against homophobia and the right of lesbians and gay men to self-defence.

? End the criminalisation and harassment of sex workers, full access to healthcare, a living wage and retraining for free. Sex workers' unions must be recognised and integrated into national union federations. They must have safe working conditions free from the control of organised crime and the dangers of life on the streets. The working class movement must demand the legalisation of prostitution under the control of the sex workers.

? Stop sexual harassment at work and domestic violence. The harassment of and violence against women must be exposed, confronted and outlawed. Fully-funded refuges must be provided to allow women to escape violence at home.

? The right to an immediate divorce on request. An equal right for all co-habiting women (married or not) to share in the household assets upon separation or divorce.

The majority of women will only be liberated and free from discrimination when the economic foundations of class rule and male supremacy are overthrown. Whilst the deep roots of this oppression lie in ancient class society, they are reinforced by global capitalism. Only a socialist society, run for human need rather than private profit, will be able to get the whole of society to take on the domestic duties, which today are mainly performed by women in the home. Only then will women be able to realise their full potential.

### **Socialism and women's liberation**

A socialist society would promote collective childcare, cooking and cleaning and an equal distribution of housework and childcare between men and women in society as a whole. Women will no longer be forced to perform these basic tasks separately in isolated family units. The social provision of these services - well funded and democratically run - could be a million times better than the provisions made in the family today. In this way, real choice, a high standard of living and real sexual equality can replace the poverty, isolation and oppression facing working class women today.

This is why Workers Power and the League for the Fifth International supports the struggles of working class women across the globe, at the grassroots level, at the factory level, national and international levels. These struggles lay the basis for forging a movement led by working class women that can fight against sex discrimination, the oppression of women and the super-exploitation that grows out of it. A working class women's movement needs to be open and democratic - and refuse to recognise national borders by linking up with struggles in other countries. It needs to involve local activists, women's groups and federations, but also pull in the trade unions that together can strike a blow against the capitalists and bring the system to a grinding halt through strikes and occupations.

The need for such a movement lies not only in the scale of the attacks faced by women across the globe, but also in the fact that the traditional organisations of the working class fail to meet the needs of women

workers and women at home. To counter this, women need to join unions and campaigns and fight for the full participation of women and for leadership positions at all levels. In these organisations women must have the right to caucus to resist sexism and the institutional obstacles to women's participation.

Within a working class women's movement there will be arguments about how to take the struggle forward. We think that the only road to full women's liberation is through the overthrow of the global capitalist system, and that means building an international working class party - the Fifth International. Join us!

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**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/women-fight-back>