



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P SPRING 2019

2 TUC women's conference

3 Su Patel, chair for 2019

4 women in construction

5 Kendal Bromley-Bewes

6 gender pension gap

7 Kerala and Sudan

is
re
s
is
is

TUC women 2019



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN CHAIR ANITA WRIGHT TAKES A LOOK AT THE AGENDA FOR THIS YEAR'S TUC WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

IT comes as no surprise to find that, once again, income inequality, the gender pay gap, poverty and dignity at work, are top of the agenda at this year's TUC Women's Conference.

women and pay inequality

In 2018, the UK's estimated average gender pay gap for all employees including those who work part-time, was 17.1% (Office for National Statistics). Depriving women of the wages they are legitimately owed is nothing more than daylight robbery, yet employers seem to be getting away with it. The introduction in 2016 of legislation requiring employers to publish their gender pay gap showed that 7,795 out of 10,016 employers in Britain still pay their men more than women.

The number of women in work is rising – 78% in 2017 compared to 57% in 1975 according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies – so it's even more important that the gender pay gap is a top priority for our movement.

It is a national scandal that across Britain women still have to fight for equal pay for work of equal value and when they do win, as in the case of the Glasgow City workers, they are sometimes accused of being money grabbing. The Glasgow cleaners, carers and catering workers were underpaid by the City Council for 12 years and fully deserve every penny of their settlement.

This is why Unite's motion on collective bargaining is so important. For too long the struggle for equal pay and the representation of women in some workplaces has been seen as purely a women's issue without recognising the wider impact of work and pay inequality. As the NAPO amendment makes clear: "Women are more likely to occupy insecure, low status jobs with little or no decision making authority. Those in such jobs experience higher levels of negative life events, relationship, housing and mental health problems, physical and emotional abuse, and reduced social support."

So it time for trade unions to make sure that women are at the negotiating table for all sectoral collective bargaining discussions, not just in workplaces which with a majority of women workers.

women in the workplace

Workers have the right to be treated with dignity in the workplace yet, according to

the recent TUC report, over half of working women experienced sexual harassment and/or bullying in their workplace. Despite this four out five women did not report it to their employer for fear it might negatively impact on their work prospects or relationship in the job. Our silence has allowed this harassment to persist for far too long and it's not good enough to dismiss it as a "bit of banter". Without seriously challenging this behaviour it will continue for generations to come and we are already seeing this becoming an issue for girls and women teachers in schools and colleges. This is why delegates will be asked to support the creation of a 'gold standard' complaints procedure that is robust and gives members confidence in the process, and campaign to protect women's rights to respect and dignity at work and the introduction of compulsory sexual harassment training by employers.

Another aspect of harassment is the way pregnant women workers are treated. A government commissioned report in 2018 found suggested that 54,000 women may lose their job due to pregnancy or maternity leave every year – that's one in nine pregnant women who have been fired, made redundant or felt forced to resign. Although pregnancy and maternity discrimination is illegal it is clear that the current laws are just not strong enough to deal with this problem.

women and poverty

Despite more women being in work, poverty in Britain is rising. Four million workers are living in poverty, a rise of more than half a million over five years. This rise in in-work poverty has been driven almost entirely by the increase in the poverty rate of working parents, particularly for lone parents, 91% of who are women (Joseph Rowntree Report 2018). We now have nearly half of children in lone-parent families living in poverty and the introduction of the Universal Credit scheme has made it 10 times worse. Despite it being deeply flawed the government seems determined to push ahead which is why the TSSA motion calls for an immediate halt in the roll-out and an entirely new scheme to be developed.

Women are going without food so their children can eat and malnourished mothers are giving birth to underweight babies. For many women the impact of poverty pay and welfare cuts can mean choosing between food or sanitary wear. A number of trade unions have been campaigning against Period Poverty notably CWU and Unite and several motions for the TUC Women's Conference focus on this issue. The ASLEF motion commends the Scottish government for introducing schemes to offer access to free period products to low income families and in educational institutions and the Welsh government for

ring-fencing £1 million for free sanitary products for those most in need and calls on the UK government to follow their example.

women's health

The World Health Organisation recognises that women and girls have specific health needs that are different from men and many health systems are failing to meet the needs of women and girls.

Women are the main care givers in our society, and as such are the custodians of family health, playing a critical role in supporting other family members including children, the elderly and disabled. The strength and endurance of women is often key in keeping a family going.

Underfunding of the NHS and mental health services has led to shortages of qualified staff including school nurses, midwives, sexual health advisors and psychologists which in turn means that many women and girls are not getting the support they require. A recent NHS survey of over 9,000 young people found nearly one in four young women has experienced mental illness. Young women aged 17 to 19 were twice as likely as young men to suffer; and nearly half of those in their late teens with mental health problems had self-harmed or attempted suicide.

The International Council on Women's Health Issues is right in saying that the physical and mental health of women and girls determines the health and well-being of our modern world which is why we need to step up the campaign for proper funding levels for our health services.

women and the far right

Prolonged periods of austerity and the increasing gap between rich and poor has led many people to become disillusioned with traditional social democratic parties. This is fertile ground for the far-right and we have seen these forces reinventing themselves as 'populist' parties, most notably in Brazil, Ukraine and Italy. For the first time since 1932 Germany now has members of the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) elected to its parliament. In such dangerous times, international solidarity is vital which is why the UCU is calling for support for Brazilian academics that face growing restrictions on free speech and expression, especially in relation to anti-fascist history and activism.

and finally...

As the delegates of the TUC Women's Conference 2019 pack up their papers on the final day of this three day conference, after sharing their experiences and challenges they will undoubtedly leave ready to carry on the fight in their workplaces and communities for women's equality and justice. We must be ready to join them in the struggle.

women need unions...



SU PATEL, USDAW REPRESENTATIVE ON THE TUC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE, IS THE CHAIR OF THE 2019 TUC WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

WE meet at a time of great uncertainty for women workers in the UK – a time of rising inequality, poverty and job insecurity. Britain's exit from the EU on the 29th of this month threatens to unravel hard-won equality and human rights protections which have underpinned the rights of women workers for so long.

As women we find ourselves at the sharp end of an increasingly casualised economy – concentrated in low paid, exploitative, temporary and insecure jobs and paid less than men for doing the same job. Violence against women and girls is rising whilst prosecutions and convictions of perpetrators remains scandalously low.

This government's savage cuts to adult social care, social services and social security are threatening our relationships with those we care for, our physical and mental health, our ability to work and progress in work and undermining still further our social, economic and financial independence.

We are under-represented in decision making structures and bodies from governments to board rooms and over-represented in poverty statistics. At every stage of our lives, from the cradle to the grave, women feel the full force of inequality and discrimination.

And yet women are the face of the modern trade union movement. Indeed we are the future of the trade union movement. We are shaping the direction of our unions and winning for women in our workplaces. Our experience of sexism and discrimination acts as a powerful trigger, pushing us to join and become active in our unions.

And so I am delighted to be chairing TUC Women's Conference at such an important time for women in unions. My union is Usdaw, the shop workers union. The retail sector is not only the largest sector in the UK economy, but outside of the NHS it is also the largest employer of women in the UK. Usdaw represents over 250,000 women workers. The big issues that matter to women in Usdaw right now are the same as those that matter to women workers in all sectors and across all unions.

Balancing work and family life in increasingly insecure workplaces that offer women little in terms of pay and guaranteed hours of work is likely to be at the top of the list of concerns for almost all women workers.

UK family friendly working rights aren't working for most women workers. They don't reflect the reality of our lives making them almost useless to anyone not employed in permanent, well paid and full-time employment.

High street stores are closing at an alarming rate. Stores where generations of women have spent their entire working

lives and built their careers are closing down or facing cuts to staffing budgets forcing women out of work into the arms of the social security benefit system.

But the scale of the Conservative government's savage attack on the welfare state means that it no longer offers any sense of social security. Instead women workers are pushed into debt or towards charitable organisations to help feed and clothe their families.

Universal Credit is another disaster for low income working families, disabled workers and single parents in particular. The four weekly assessment period, the introduction of the benefits cap, the freeze of working age benefits, the reduction of working allowances, not to mention the removal of the first child premium and two child limit for new claimants have all made it harder, not easier, for working families to make ends meet and has led to a surge in the numbers of children living in poverty.

But women in unions are rising to meet these challenges. We need to stand together and make our voices heard. We must challenge the view that women can do it all and will cope with everything that gets thrown at us. I am pleased that my own union and so many others are focusing on the issue of mental health as many women are struggling with their own mental health as well as looking after everyone else.

I would like nothing more than to see women from Black and Asian backgrounds, disabled women and lesbian, bisexual and trans women getting involved and active in their unions and in politics more broadly. This conference and the TUC's women's structures are really important in giving working women a voice and making sure that our issues and concerns are centre stage in the TUC's work for the coming year. The women's conference is a vital link between the TUC and the daily lives of women workers. Over the next three days we discuss and debate all the issues that matter to us from Abortion Rights through to Zero Hours.

We bring our voices to the TUC and we speak for the thousands of women who can't be here with us.

Never has the saying "women need Unions, and Unions need women" been more relevant.

why **women construction workers** deserve better

UNITE is passionate about ensuring that all its members regardless of race or gender throughout all its sectors are not discriminated against in the workplace. This commitment is demonstrated by the work that Unite is undertaking in sectors such as construction, where women are currently very much a minority of the workforce. To better understand the challenges that women experience in construction, Unite recently surveyed our female members working in the sector. The response rate was phenomenal and provided vital insights into the working lives of women in construction.

The majority of respondents (65.3%) said their employer had failed to make adjustments to accommodate their needs as women workers. One member summed up the issues members face: "In a perceived male-dominated workforce, you have your skills and abilities regularly doubted mainly because you're a woman and some men almost feel threatened when you complete a job better than male colleagues. Some, if not all, men at first can be extremely patronising towards you, questioning your job or presuming you work in an office."

Aside from issues about pay equality, the dominant concern that arose from the survey concerned welfare facilities: the lack of clean toilets, the supply of sanitary bins and shower facilities. For example, a member gave a graphic account of her frustrations on trying to use a women's toilet on a construction site. "Toilets for females are a basic requirement but are usually locked, you have to seek the key from someone so by the time you find the person, usually male, with the key and after asking several people, also usually male, half the site know you want to use a loo and when you open the door, guess what, it is usually being used for storage."

Unite has been running a period dignity campaign across the whole union. The campaign is about period poverty because some workers struggle to pay for sanitary products. Unite's campaign has been very successful with many organisations adopting it. This week Rolls-Royce announced that not only was it adopting the period dignity campaign throughout the UK but globally across 50 countries.

Our survey clearly demonstrated that for period dignity to be achieved for women construction workers the campaign needed to be more wide-ranging. Unite is now asking construction companies to sign up to four simple policies to achieve period dignity.

- Designated female toilets, always accessible, regularly cleaned and lockable
- Handwashing facilities with running water and soap provided



- Sanitary bins provided which are clean and regularly emptied
- Sanitary products provided in a dispenser in a discreet location and ideally free.

The first site to endorse Unite's campaign was the Glasgow University campus being built by Multiplex and a campaign pack to ensure other sites follow Multiplex's lead is in the hands of all the union's reps. Implementing these simple four steps will make a significant improvement to the lives of women construction workers, judging by the comments our members made including:

- "There are female toilets available but

generally the ones on site are unisex porta-loos. These are usually disgusting"

- "I have to keep my sanitary products in my toolbox because there are no machines in the toilets. I have been told to keep them in a drawer but I don't work in office?"
- "Asked for sanitary bins, got ignored. If a female says anything they don't like, they put it down to PMT."

Construction is facing ever-growing skills shortages and effectively excluding half the population means the industry is trying to tackle the problem with one arm tied behind its back. Sadly, while there is a shortage of construction apprentices across the board, it remains much more difficult for women applicants to secure a training berth. In total nine per cent of male applicants eventually secure a construction apprenticeship while the figure for women is just six per cent. Achieving period dignity for women in construction is a small first step to making the construction industry fit for purpose for women in our industry. Employers who step up to the mark and do what is right have a far greater chance of retaining and attracting a skilled workforce.

Unite will not stop campaigning until women construction members achieve full equality in this sector.

GAIL CARTMAIL IS ASSISTANT GENERAL SECRETARY OF UNITE

Celebrate International Women's Day

WOMEN AND THE INTERNATIONAL WORKING-CLASS STRUGGLE

Ealing Green Church, Ealing Green, London W5 5QT
(Nearest Underground - Ealing Broadway)

Saturday 9 March 2019, 6.45 to 9.15pm

International Rally & Cultural Evening

International speakers, music, poetry

Finger buffet provided

Admission free

All women and men welcome

Organised by

The Coordinating Committee of Communist Parties in Britain

profile: **young** woman activist

NAW EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER
LIZ PAYNE INTERVIEWS UNISON'S KENDAL
BROMLEY-BEWES ABOUT HER LIFE, KEY
CONCERNS AND BEING A UNION ACTIVIST

I'm talking with Kendal Bromley-Bewes. Kendal is chair of Unison's Young Members' Forum and sits on the TUC Young Workers' Committee. It's Saturday morning and she tells me that she's going to spend the rest of the day working on her dissertation. She's a student children's nurse in Bristol and is researching how to achieve best outcomes for youngsters with diabetes. I'm very glad that I could catch her for an interview for *Sisters*. I've known Kendal for some time and tell her that she's one of the busiest people I know. Her hospital shifts and study can take up to 90 hours a week and she also works to support herself, currently teaching aqua-aerobics and life-guarding at her local pool. But this isn't all; Kendal at 22 years old is, in her own words, "a committed trade union activist". I ask how that came about. Her step dad is a branch secretary and when she got her first job he told her she should join a union. She's never looked back.

I want to know what are the big trade union projects she's involved in at the moment? She immediately brings in '2019 – The TUC Year of Young Workers' – an idea she herself first suggested in Unison. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be amazing to actually get the whole union to focus and think about young people for an entire year.' It went forward to the TUC Young Workers' Conference, where it passed unanimously. Then it got moved at Unison's National Delegate Conference, where again it passed unanimously. Then it was taken to TUC Congress, where I moved the motion for the third and final time and again it passed unanimously."

What does the Year of Young Workers involve? I quickly learn that there are many initiatives by both the TUC and individual unions. The TUC are in the process of rolling out young leadership courses, to get our young people at the forefront of the movement. Unison, Kendal explains, has lots of important young workers projects in the regions – on raising awareness of sexual harassment at work in the Eastern region, on pensions and young people in the northern region and campaigning to get employers to sign up to Unison's Respect Your Youth Charter in the south-west and Cymru/Wales (where the charter was developed).

Unison is releasing new education options for young members and, for trade-unionists who aren't so young, it is publishing education packages on interacting with young people and how to work effectively with young members' officers in the branches. It is working with its self-organised groups and sectors to create better communication, so that people of all ages understand how young



people are at work, and the issues they face on a daily basis.

Kendal tries to sum up these issues for me, drawing on her own experience and that of other young workers she knows, as well as Unison and TUC research:

"It's no wonder we're working all the hours god sends, when you see how little young people are paid. One in three young workers is on low pay and we're paid £2.81 less per hour than our older colleagues. Plus, people under 25 get a lower minimum wage. But what has struck me is that so many young people don't even seem to know they're being underpaid. And the ones that do know don't raise it because they're scared they'll be out of the door. So often we just put up with it."

Kendal is no stranger to zero hours contract and says she's noticed that young people, herself included, always get called to cover shifts other people don't want. She's sometimes felt under so much pressure that she's missed lectures to go in and work. "As soon as I said no, I stopped being offered work. You're backed into a corner" she said.

She tells me of a young woman she knows who got called in at such short notice that she didn't know, even from one hour to the next, if or when she'd be working. Most of the time she got pressured into doing night shifts. Often, she'd turn up and simply be told when she got there she wasn't needed after all. She was in a poverty trap, isolated and couldn't do anything to change her situation either. No possibility of getting a non-zero-hours job, a decent place to live, enough sleep, time with friends and family for her! She might get called to work at any moment and she couldn't refuse. This same woman was a young and very able trade union activist but had to give that up too as she didn't know from one day or hour to the next when she'd be available, which was a big loss to the union. "According to TUC research," Kendal says, "one in five 21 to 30 year olds have had a zero-hours contract, so all of this is a common experience."

We talk about young women at work. Kendal says that one of the biggest issues is harassment and bullying. She describes the situation as "horrific" and says that it's happening all the time and

everywhere. The perpetrators are managers, work colleagues, service users and customers. It's very tough to be a young woman and if you are black, disabled or LGBT it's so much harder still. "Young black women face so much hate on a daily basis." Young women often don't see women in management and more senior jobs and sometimes the women who have made it through are not sympathetic to young women. There are too many blocks and barriers still to women getting on at work and a lack of opportunities to train and take on new roles. "Women should be empowered to believe in themselves."

What about women and young people in trade unions? Kendal unsurprisingly says that although huge progress has been made much needs to be done. Young people need to be listened to and treated with respect and tokenism avoided. Power structures work against young people and especially women. Young members should not only be in young members' positions speaking for young workers and women should not only be in women's positions speaking on women's issues. Much more resource needs to be put in, so that the resolutions that are passed on a regular basis can be properly implemented and young activists don't get run ragged. Young workers should be seen, heard and listened to in everything the union does. This is something Kendal says she fights for on a daily basis.

In summary, Kendal suggests that the TUC Year of Young Workers should be treated as "a call to arms" with trade unions and campaigning organisations, such as our National Assembly of Women, listening to and getting behind the next generation – understanding its experience and building to genuinely involve young people. This will require a huge intergenerational effort but without it, the future of the labour movement and its struggles in the workplace and for justice and equality in society will be in jeopardy.

Kendal thanks *Sisters* for giving her the opportunity to speak. I tell her that the thanks all go to her for giving us an insight into her life, values and activities. I wish her well and hope that she gets all the support she and others like her need and deserve from the movement.

gender pension gap

OF course we must fight the gender pay gap, but the gender pension gap is even more alarming.

The fact that many women are severely disadvantaged when they retire has long been recognised by the NPC (National Pensioners Convention). Many older women suffer because they relied upon their husband's NI (National Insurance) contributions and consequently now receive only a fractional BSP (Basic State Pension). One would have thought that these women could apply for Pension Credit at £163 per week. However, many women in couples find they are not eligible for Pension Credit as benefits are calculated on the joint income. This actually discriminates further against women.

Further problems have been caused for women born in the 1950s by the introduction of the New State Pension in 2016 because it coincided with the government's decision to accelerate equalisation with men of the SPA (State Pension Age). Their state pension entitlements changed without warning; now they suffer inequality and unfair treatment.

In spite of NPC meetings with senior government ministers about the unfair treatment of women in this age range, no compensation has been considered.

But these women have not given in. The *Morning Star* on 5 October alerted us to the rally planned for 10 October to protest against the government's refusal to change its plan to raise the SPA for women. Backto60 and Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) joined to express their anger.

The New State Pension requires five more years' NI contributions. The Institute of Fiscal studies (IFS) commented that "most people born after 1970 could expect to receive less from the state pension". However, it will be uprated using the 'Triple lock', and many women will be better off than on the old BSP.

You are advised to study the NPC booklets, in particular the recent pamphlet *Understanding Women's Pension Inequality*. If you are at the WTUC in March these will be available at the NPC Women's Working Party stall.

The ways in which current arrangements determine a worker's pension benefit high earners to the disadvantage of poorer workers, such as those in part-time work, on maternity leave or caring for children or parents. Credits of NI contributions can be awarded in a number of different circumstances, most not automatic. It is wise to enquire from the Department of Work and Pensions as having too few NI contributions can lead to reduced pension entitlements.

The trade union Prospect reported that "UK women face pension 'gap' of £7,000", based on their analysis of responses to the DWP's Family Resources Survey.

The Sunday Times on 4 November covered Pension Equality: "Seven sins so deadly for women's pensions" reported by Kate Palmer. Many of the same issues were capably addressed by the Women's Budget Group (WBG) that made a response to the autumn 2018 Budget that included raising personal allowances. The WBG suggested that as this benefits a larger proportion of men than women, the chancellor should instead have raised the state pension to the Minimum Income Standard.

The WBG also criticised the missed opportunity to prevent the irresponsible waste of taxpayers' money on tax relief used to encourage workers to take up work based pensions. This benefits those on high salaries (mostly men) who are not in need of support, whereas the money saved could fund an increased state pension.

Another WBG comment was on the chancellor's attempt to boost private pensions for the self-employed. His measure will not help the growing number of self-employed women, who earn less than both female employees and male self-employed. Instead he should increase the state pension that benefits all low earning workers. In particular the WBG recommends that Auto-enrolment pensions should be converted into Voluntary Earnings-related State Pension Addition (VESPA), a pay as you go scheme that is better suited to the needs of women workers.

The WBG's evidence backs up NPC policy: we must demand an adequate state pension. Note that auto-enrolment does not help women. It is a defined contribution private savings scheme, which we believe is incapable of delivering a meaningful income in retirement to millions of low paid workers – many of whom would be women – because the contribution rates are so low.

Women, get the facts about pensions and help the NPC campaign.

BY JANET SHAPIRO MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL PENSIONERS' CONVENTION WOMEN'S WORKING PARTY

FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH: UNDERSTANDING THE NEW STATE PENSION AND A DECENT STATE PENSION FOR ALL GENERATIONS £2 FROM NPC

WWW.IPE.COM/NEWS/PENSIONS/UK-WOMEN-FACE-PENSION-GAP-OF-7000-REPORT-SAYS/10027639.ARTICLE

WBG.ORG.UK/ANALYSIS/AUTUMN-BUDGET-2018-WBG-FULL-ANALYSIS/

WWW.PENSIONSADVISORYSERVICE.ORG.UK/ABOUT-PENSIONS/PENSIONS-BASICS/AUTOMATIC-ENROLMENT

WWW.BACKTO60.COM/

WOMEN AGAINST STATE PENSION INEQUALITY WWW.WASPI.CO.UK/



protect the bus pass

THE National Concessionary Bus Pass scheme has been enormously successful, allowing free bus travel between 9.30am and 11pm on weekdays and all day at weekends for pensioners and eligible disabled people anywhere in the UK.

Last year, as part of the #protectthepass campaign, the TUC Midlands Pensioners' Network travelled around towns and cities on buses speaking with residents and shoppers to raise awareness of protecting the pass, investing and expanding the bus services and defending the workforce.

The campaign was a winner at Midlands TUC's awards night on 30 November 2018.

With the help of partners throughout the Midlands, members of the TUC Midlands Pensioners' Network travelled from Hereford to Skegness, visiting 23 places, collecting over 1,700 signatures on postcards which were sent to over 90 of the Midlands' 107 MPs and to about 50 others.

Ten Midlands Labour MPs campaigned with them including Wolverhampton MP Emma Reynolds who said: "I think the free bus pass does a huge amount of good to ensure pensioners are not isolated in their homes. It gives them the freedom to travel and go anywhere they like – it also benefits the economy as they will be spending money when they are out and about."

The TUC Midlands Pensioners' Network is urging other communities to follow their example and join in the campaign throughout 2019.

YVONNE WASHBOURNE REPORTS

women in Kerala



TRAVEL is good for the soul. It's also good for widening your understanding of how the world works and the problems and issues faced by workers.

During a recent visit to Washington DC at an international conference on The Future of Labour Law, it was clear that workers in America face the same problems as workers in the UK. Low union density, even lower coverage of collective bargaining arrangements, both of which have led to increased levels of inequality, poor pay and insecurity at work. Add to that, hostile judicial decisions that try to break trade union organisation and you have a perfect storm brewing.

But workers are fighting back. Teachers – predominantly female – in Oklahoma, Los Angeles, Virginia, Denver and Oakland have taken to the streets, joining together with support staff (mostly female) in strike action demanding higher pay and more investment in schools. Their mood is optimistic. Their demands are supported. Plus, public opinion for unions is standing at a 15-year high with Gallup reporting recently that 62% of Americans approve of unions.

In January I was in India. Unfortunately, I missed the strike action, when millions of Indian workers went out on strike demanding an end to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attack on workers' rights and collective bargaining arrangements.

That was swiftly followed in early February with a demonstration organised by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led Left Front. The demonstration attracted over one million people in Kolkata's largest public park, pledging to oust Modi's right-wing BJP party from West Bengal in the upcoming elections in May.

All good stuff. Workers on the march. So, I was particularly disappointed to read about the general strike in Kerala –

a place I'm very fond of, with family connections and led by the Communist Party. Why? Because this particular strike was called by Hindu chauvinists in protest against women's right to enter a temple.

In September 2018 the Supreme Court in India overturned a centuries-old ban on the entry of women of reproductive age into the temple. But opponents of the ruling continued to block women between the ages of 10 to 50 from entering the shrine on the basis that menstruation is considered impure!

Despite the aggression, in early January two women in their 40s, walked into the temple – leading to it being closed down for a "purification ritual". Hindu hardliners – using the temple as a rallying point for the far right – have attacked female pilgrims, threatened journalists and pelted police with stones. The response of the Keralan women was immediate. Tens of thousands of women formed a 620-km human chain "in support of gender equality"

This isn't just about religion. It's politics. The ruling BJP, a section of which organised the "general strike" against the women, sees the action as a counter-attack following the 5.5 million strong "women's wall" organised in support of women's rights by the CPI-M on New Year's day.

With elections coming up in May, political lines are being drawn and the BJP is using violence and intimidation to try and undermine the CPI-M, which leads Kerala's government. KK Shailaja, minister for social justice in Kerala, said her government stood for gender equality. She said those saying that women are impure should be ashamed of themselves. The Minister joined the women's chain to show her support.

BY NAW MEMBER CAROLYN JONES

sudan



LIZ PAYNE IS AN NAW EXECUTIVE MEMBER

HUGE country-wide demonstrations began in Sudan in mid-December 2018, initially against the hiking of the price of bread and in general the disastrous economic mismanagement by the 30-year dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir which had left an economy in ruins and the Sudanese people unable to afford even the basics of life. Women have from the outset been prominent in these protests. The backlash was brutal. Demonstrators were met with extreme violence, including live fire from the security services. Protestors, activists, journalists, trade unionists, doctors, lawyers, students and leading members of opposition parties have been subjected to mass round ups and arrest.

According to reports, upwards of 150 women are now in prison at any one time for no other "crime" than peaceful protest. These include prominent leaders of the labour and women's movement, some held incommunicado in undisclosed detention centres and many severely tortured. Abuse of detainees by the National Security and Intelligence Service (NISS) is well evidenced and all those being held are at serious risk according to Human Rights Watch. There are also allegations that imprisoned opposition leaders, including elderly and vulnerable people, are denied their prescription medicines and are unable to be seen by doctors, thus putting their health and lives at risk.

Among those detained is Adeela Alzaibag, President of the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU) who, according to the UK and Ireland branch of the SWU, was arrested together with other female colleagues and taken to an unknown location. The organisation has stated that some of the women have been severely tortured, that their families are not allowed to see them, and that they have no access to lawyers.

Another prisoner is Fayza Ibrahim Nugod, an elderly woman arrested as she came out of a meeting in the Communist Party Headquarters in Khartoum. Fayza, is a renowned teacher and a member of the political bureau of the Sudanese Communist Party with responsibility for trade union work. Her comrade, Hanady Alfadul, a member of the Party's central committee, is also detained. So is Dr Amal Jabralla, a consultant psychiatrist and clinical director of a trauma centre for women in Omdurman, a leading medical sector trade unionist and on the central committee of the Sudanese Communist Party.

continued overleaf

sudan continued

continued from page 7

Holding women indefinitely is not the only tactic of the security forces. A practice designed to traumatise those who are coming onto the streets and terrify those who are even considering doing so – rounding up and arresting women, savagely questioning and then releasing them on a rolling basis – means that it is impossible to say precisely how many are being held and where at any one time. However, if this is meant to deter women, it is certainly failing. They are coming out again and again in a manner described by the Sudanese movement as “amazing”, “astonishing”, “brave” and “resilient.”

This is not the first time since Omar al-Bashir seized power in a coup in 1989 that street demonstrations in Sudan have been met with off the scale violence, nor is it the first time that the security forces have adopted a savage ‘shoot to kill’ policy.

This time it has left scores of protesters dead and hundreds injured, with the toll rising daily. Doctors and medical staff are being intimidated, arrested and tortured to deter them from providing treatment to the wounded. Twenty-six year old Dr Babiker Abdelhamid asked the security forces to let him get the most critically injured protestors he was treating in his home to hospital. Witnesses say he was

shot dead on the spot.

The NISS is brutally interrogating all detainees, hoping to find out who’s who behind the organisation of the protests. Those viewed as leaders or key influencers of the opposition are being horrifically and systematically tortured, including the 28-year-old spokesperson of the Teachers’ Professional Association, who after daily ‘questioning’ is almost certain to lose his sight and the murdered teacher whose horrifically mutilated and sexually abused body was dumped for the family to find. But things are backfiring. It is being said on the streets of Khartoum and other cities that the regime of torturers has now crossed a threshold. “No one will ever forgive them for these heinous crimes.”

Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for East Africa, in condemning the arrests and killings in Sudan, has stated categorically that the root cause of the deteriorating economic conditions must be addressed, not the prevention of protest. Given the nature of the ‘root cause’, it is hardly surprising that women everywhere, including the young generation who have grown up with the dictatorship, are at the forefront on the streets. The regime has pursued a disastrous economic policy, slavishly following the dictates of the IMF and World Bank.

Opposition has been suppressed, free trade unions banned, and faith-based inequality imposed on women - affecting their family, work and social life and participation in the wider society. What started last December as protests at a lack of basic necessities - bread, fuel, electricity and transport - and sky-rocketing inflation running at 70%, the second highest in the world, were soon voicing the demand for the regime to go to pave the way for the establishment of a people’s democratic government. This continues unabated.

The Sudanese Women’s Union (UK and Ireland) is calling on all peace, democracy and human rights activists to express solidarity with the peaceful protesters in Sudan, to condemn the Sudanese government’s brutal crack-down on peaceful protests, demand the release of all detainees and support their demand of bringing those who murdered protestors to justice. We should demand the immediate end to the arrest, detention and torture of our brave sisters and do everything we can to promote the right of the people of Sudan to demand a change of government and choose a path to a free and democratic future, without interference from hostile forces either inside or outside Sudan.

Sisters, we salute your struggle!

what’s on...

NAW Executive Committee meetings are open to *all* members.

The next meeting is on
Saturday 23 March 2019 at 11am, in London

If you would like to attend please contact the Secretary on naw@sisters.org.uk or at NAW, Bridge House, Newport Street, Hay on Wye, Powys HR3 5BG

NAW Annual General Meeting is 11am to 3pm on **Saturday 27 April 2019** at Unite House, 128 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8TN

8 March
International Women’s Day
The National Assembly of Women sends greetings to sisters everywhere
Fighting for equality, peace and progress

join the NAW now!

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £20 for the annual subscription (£10 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is:
£20 (local organisation/NAW branch), £45 (regional organisation), £60 (national)

Name _____

Address _____

postcode _____

Organisation _____

phone _____

email _____

Send to: NAW, 1 Lee Close, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 0DW