

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN

WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY AGAINST AUSTERITY REPORT

On Saturday 22nd February 2014 over 250 women from local campaigns, trade unions, disability groups, black activists, peace organisations and environmental groups came together to share their experiences of how the government's austerity policies are having a disproportionate impact on women. This report is an attempt to capture the spirit of the day and is only a snap-shot of the invaluable contribution made by the speakers and delegates in highlighting the government's social, political and economic agenda and aid the process of articulating an alternative vision for our society that fully integrates the views of women.

IMPACT OF AUSTERITY ON WOMEN AND SETTING OUT THE ALTERNATIVES

Dona Feltham, President of the National Assembly of Women opened the conference and explained that it had been organised by a group of women whose organisations had been original signatories to the People's Assembly. It was not the intention to set up a separate women's organisation but we wanted our voices to be heard. We recognised that women's unique experience of fighting austerity must be taken into account and that we should be fully involved in the formulation of any alternative progressive social and economic policies.



Dawn Butler, prospective MP for Brent Central and former Labour Minister for youth got the conference off to a great start by quoting Maya Angelou and Sojourner Truth's famous speech *Ain't I a Woman*. She drew a direct link between the lack of representation of women and the savage cuts to women's employment and public services.

Natalie Bennett, Leader of the Green Party stressed the need for society to deliver a decent standard of living for everyone which would mean some people giving up a lot in order to create greater equality. This should be done in a sustainable way that minimises the environmental impact and recognises the limitations of our planet.



Kate Hudson, CND General Secretary said that a 0.7% economic growth does not qualify as a recovery. She said that the government's strategy was to roll back the welfare state by falsely claiming that money was limited. At the same time they were wasting millions on arms and war and planning on spending £100 billion on new nuclear weapons. She called for military spending to be cut not ring-fenced and to re-think international relationships for life not death.

Sarah Veale, TUC Head of Equality and Employment Rights denounced David Cameron's amoral political agenda and received loud applause when she said that the trade union movement should take industrial action, including strikes if necessary, in the fight against further cuts to services and jobs.

Eleanor Lewington reports on **Challenging the Myths about Austerity** workshop chaired by Clare Solomon from the People's Assembly

Mary Evans, LSE academic, **Jacqui Howard** from the People's Assembly and **Carolyn Simpson**, Chair of SERTUC Women's Rights Committee looked at the way the government has created a range of myths to justify its austerity programme, ably assisted by the majority of the media. It all started with David Cameron's ludicrous statement that we are all in this together yet those to blame for the financial crisis, the bankers have never been called to account and still continue to receive huge bonuses. The false idea that the rich make a massive contribution to society and to make the them work harder you have to pay them more, whereas to make the poor work harder you have to pay them less, needs to be exposed as a falsehood. Central to the government's policy is that we cannot afford to maintain public expenditure levels at their current rate. The truth is that over £120 billion is lost in unpaid, evaded or avoided taxes yet the government refuses to act on this issue. Benefit claimants are also demonised by TV programmes like Benefit Street and stories that £24 out of every £100 of benefits are misappropriated, when in fact only 70p per £100 is the real figure. The real scroungers are the tax dodgers. The idea that current pensioners, most of whom are women, are well off is being perpetuated when in fact many women pensioners are living below the poverty line. And finally, George Osborne's attempt to tell us that the economy is recovering and employment is rising, flies in the face of reality where more and more companies are closing, the only available jobs are part-time, where zero hours contracts are rife and with pay levels woefully below a living wage.



Barbara White reports on the **No to Racist Scapegoating** workshop chaired by Barbara Ntuny from NUS Black Students

Zita Holbourne, Chair of Black Activists Rising Against the Cuts (BARAC) stated that UKIP was exploiting the current economic situation and we should not succumb to its propaganda. Racism is increasing not just because of austerity but because it is fuelled by a right wing press which falsely maintains that Britain is full whereas migrants claim less benefits and make massive economic, social and cultural contributions to society. David Cameron maintains that multi-culturalism has failed but this is not true and we should promote and celebrate our social diversity particularly on the 7th March which is Nelson Mandela Day. The biggest cuts are in deprived areas where the majority of black people live. But women are fighting back as shown by the demonstration by women in Newham on 22nd March under the banner: *Institutional racism is ruining people's lives* and by supporting organisations like Stop Watch which opposes the police's stop and search policy. Delegates shared their own experiences - a disabled woman from Afghanistan who had been living in India with her husband, a campaigning journalist was forced to flee after his disappearance said when she arrived in the UK she was given a flat that was completely unsuitable for a person in a wheelchair and is now fighting against deportation. A Muslim woman explained how she had encountered racism because she was black but realised it was also because she was working class. The workshop concluded that Black women suffer doubly because of their gender and because they are black but exploitation and oppression by the rich impacts on everyone.

Rose Keeping reports on **Women's Health** workshop chaired by Councillor Emma Corlett

Emma Corlett, UNISON steward opened with an overview of the proposed 400 redundancies of mental health care staff in Norfolk and Suffolk. Previous reviews and restructures have taken out back office staff and so-called inefficiencies. Job losses will now fall on front line staff such as occupational therapists and clinical psychologists at the time when services are receiving 140 referrals each day, as people become increasingly distressed by the impact of austerity. A UNISON public meeting to oppose the cuts saw more than 300 people turn up. Workers and service users are fighting together.

Ros Bragg from Maternity Action said that increasing numbers of births are being accompanied by decreasing numbers of midwives. Heads of midwifery services are having to close their units due to so-called "excess demand". They are having to continually redeploy staff from shift to shift. Although the government has good policy on one to one care during childbirth it does not match the clear evidence of staffing problems. The policy is un-costed and there is no maternity tariff. The workforce is stressed out and many midwives are planning to leave whilst the government shamefully blames migrants for freeloading on the NHS. **Kerry Abel** from Abortion Rights said that more than half all NHS Trusts have a black hole in funding for abortion. In local settings many women may come up against anti-choice GPs and delays in referral make the procedure less safe. Cuts to sexual health services result in more unwanted pregnancies and worse sexual health with impacts later in life. As with childbirth, abortion is beset with ideological attacks and mythology. There was a lively discussion about the various campaigns to protect services in London, Scotland and elsewhere. Several delegates from pensioners' campaigns drew attention to the way in which older people are being blamed for living longer and constantly told they are rich. At the same time, new drug criteria from NICE include social efficacy. Delegates were very clear that the NHS is being prepared for privatisation with a US style insurance system and agreed that we have got to get the people together because this is theft and immoral. Local activism and a joined up approach across the country is vital so that campaigns are not picked off one hospital at a time.



Pat Peters reports on **Fighting Inequality in Education** workshop chaired by Feyzi Ismail from East London People's Assembly

Kiri Tunks, NUT activist explained how attacks on teachers are sexist and ideological. Education is hierarchical with not many women in the top jobs. Gove is dictating what will be taught in schools and how it will be taught. He is constantly denigrating and humiliating teachers. Complaints of sexism are up by 200% in the Education department. 2 in 5 teachers leave teaching in their first 5 years of service. She pointed out that there are 3 main unions in schools and argued that now is the time when they should and must work together. The NUT is working to empower women and encouraging them to become workplace reps. At the last election 33% of teachers voted Tory, 25% voted Lib-Dem, if there was an election now the percentages would be much less.

Charlotte Bennett, NUS Women's Officer from Mid-Kent said there has been a 17% cut in women's officers and this is mainly in support services. She expressed concerns about student debt which could take over 15 years to repay. 70% of women will not have paid back their student loans within 30 years. The austerity attacks on female students generally means a lack of support services particularly in financial support so that they can complete their education. Student Unions are working to provide support on such issues as sexual health, safety on the streets, abortion rights as well as racism. **Meera Sabaratnam**, UCU activist said that universities are starting to dictate what can be taught and are bringing in non-academic staff and using students as teachers. Many have very few academics on their Board. Arts and cultural subjects now receive less funding than the sciences. The success of a university is now based on how much work is carried out on behalf of corporations. Sexism in universities is on the increase; and some universities are encouraging women lecturers and students to attend courses on improving their confidence. Discussion covered the sell-off of student loans; female students experiencing increased and blatant sexism; how academies are the road to privatising education and the myth of parental choice.

Lorene Fabian reports on **Building a National Movement through Community Campaigning** workshop chaired by Rachel Newton of the People's Charter

Pilgrim Tucker, Unite Communities spoke of the terrifying onslaught on working class people and posed the question "are we capable of breaking the austerity measures?" Unite has set up the Community sector of the union, aimed at non-working people who may have lost faith in the political system need to get inspired to fight and link up with workplaces who have no union or say at work. In many areas in the UK Community branches have been successful in linking into and working with local campaigns. **Donna Guthrie** from Black Activists Rising Against Cuts spoke about how the cuts are hitting the most vulnerable in society. The effect on Black and Ethnic minority women is huge. Job losses in the workplace, particularly in the public sector disproportionately affect Black women. Pakistani and Bangladeshi women fare even worse. The impact on Black single parents is also an issue of real concern. Donna spoke about the number of deaths in police custody of young Black men and how mothers worry that their sons may not even come home. She said we must reach out and heighten activism within Black communities. **Louise Irvine** from the Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign said that from the start it was obvious that the community cared about their hospital. At an early demonstration the campaign organisers expected 2,000 people but 10,000 turned up. She said the campaign was successful because the community worked together and all the sectors came on board: Health Visitors, Nurses and Midwives, BMA, faith groups and Millwall Football Club. In January 2013, 25,000 people came out on the streets to show their anger at the closure and finally the campaigners won through the courts. It was recognised that personal and immediate issues facing people will always mobilise them to fight for the NHS. The workshop concluded we need a national campaign and we must work together, fight together and win together



Megan Dobney reports on **Transport is an Equality Issue** workshop chaired by Sharon Allen from Charter for Women

Caroline Russell, Green Party spokesperson on transport said that streets were noisy, unpleasant and unsafe particularly for children. Children from poorer backgrounds are five times more likely to have an accident on our roads. She called for a reduction in car usage which would reduce pollution and presented the case for a better and safer environment that promoted cycling and walking as well as an efficient public transport system. **RMT activist**, Sandra spoke about the tremendous public support for the campaign in London against the closure of booking offices and emphasised the importance of staff in maintaining a safe environment for transport users. Staffing cuts will lead to more stations being un-staffed and could make some stations no-go areas particularly for women because it raises people's anxiety about anti-social behaviour. She gave examples of cases where staff have prevented serious accidents which is why Action for Rail is campaigning against Boris Johnson's cuts in station staff. Sandra also drew attention to the £15m cost of employing senior managers on over £100,000pa. **Paula Peters** from Bromley Disabled People Against the Cuts, highlighted the vital role that underground staff play in helping disabled people, particularly as 206 underground and 5 CrossRail stations are without step free access. It is likely that everyone will have a period of disability some time in their life so access should be a campaign for all. The campaign to keep the East Coast Mainline in public hands and stop the government plans to put it back under private control was discussed and it was noted that this is gaining support with a day of action planned for March 7th. In public ownership the operation is providing £800m to the treasury, and a much better service. The parlous state of public transport outside of London was also discussed, where there is no integrated approach and private bus companies compete against each other. County Council funding is being slashed, ever worsening services in rural areas where many people have no access to public transport to get to work. The workshop concluded that only a fully integrated, publically owned, fully funded and staffed system could deliver a service for everyone.

Liz Payne reports on **All Work and No Equal Pay** workshop chaired by Jane Stewart from Unite

Diana Holland, Assistant General Secretary of Unite the Union spoke about the importance of women's struggles for equal pay throughout history and today particularly the Ford Dagenham workers and the campaign for equal pay in Vauxhalls among the sewing machinists. She talked about the links between low pay and equal pay and the important contribution our campaigns for the living wage and the national minimum wage have made. It was a tragedy that last year saw an increase in the gender pay gap after years of slow, steady progress. "I'm not saying it's been good for men, it's just been worse for women". Women still earn 15 per cent less per hour than men, a pay gap that costs full-time women over £5,000 a year and the five million women part-time workers are faring even worse, with two in five now earning less than the living wage. The TUC has calculated the gender pay gap by comparing the mean hourly pay, excluding overtime, of full-time men and women. Mean hourly full-time pay for men is £16.91 an hour, and £14.25 for women. This hourly pay gap of £2.66 adds up to £5,187 over the course of a year for a full-time worker. The gender pay gap using median hourly earnings also increased from 9.5 per cent to ten per cent. In the private sector, the pay gap can be as great as 15%. Diane said that trade union organisation, collective bargaining and sectoral wage bargaining will be essential to closing the gender pay gap. She also called for changes in the law. Delegates agreed that tougher action is needed to force companies to look at their pay gaps, the need for class actions at employment tribunals and for there to be statutory requirements for equal pay audits. The excellent campaign *Equal Pay Day* in November was highlighted and the opportunities to organise local actions in town centres with the message "if you don't pay women properly then they can't spend it in the local economy" which would highlight women's consumer power. Low income creates a vicious circle, forcing women to choose cheap options in clothing, food, and pay less for child care. Companies should be made to publish data of equal pay so women as consumers could choose companies which pay women properly. Delegates agreed we need to campaign against low pay to win equal pay.



Pam Flynn reports on **Women and War** workshop chaired by Fran Legg from Stop the War Coalition

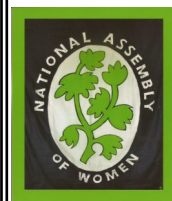
Haifa Zangana, Iraqi writer and campaigner said that there were 1,000 civilian deaths in Iraq in January 2014, the same monthly civilian casualty count as in 2007. The law allows detention without trial which for women brings dishonour and risks rape and torture. There are 48 pieces of legislation which carry the death penalty. The low level war in Iraq is having an economic impact and women are losing out in employment and participation in education is at its lowest ever level. There are huge numbers of widows, with responsibility for childcare and as heads of their family. Polygamy is returning to Iraq with a market in

marriage. Women are fighting back and there are huge demonstrations. There was a wide ranging discussion on the impact of war on women including: strip-searching; forced displacement and women trying to keep their children fed and safe; women forced to cook for soldiers, carry looted goods and used as sexual slaves and the increase in domestic abuse when soldiers return home suffering from mental illness. It was agreed that we must "look for the money" as it is due to multinational corporations exploiting natural resources. The absence of women's voices in peace negotiations and in rebuilding civil society is a concern as is the USA funding "false" non-representative women's organisations. It is vital to weaken UK and US militarism and imperialism. Proposed celebrations of the centenary of WWI were deplored, and support expressed for the No Glory campaign and publication, particularly as the women who made a considerable effort to bring an end to the war in 1915 were being hidden from history.

WOMEN AND THE FIGHTBACK AGAINST AUSTERITY

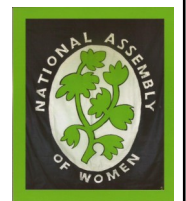
Anita Wright, Secretary of the National Assembly of Women, chaired the final plenary session, which focussed on the fightback and encouraged delegates to get active and organised. **Christine Blower**, NUT General Secretary called on everyone to come to the defence of the education system and support the national teachers' strike on March 26th. She said it was scandalous that academies were getting away with using unqualified staff and paying teachers less whilst paying senior leaders higher rates than in other local authority schools. **Louise Irvine**, GP and Save Lewisham Hospital campaigner told of how an enormous number of women became involved in the campaign and reminded delegates that women tend to work in a more inclusive way. **Lindsey German**, Convenor of Stop the War Coalition stated that we face a direct attack on the working class. She said that the first equal pay strike was in 1918, and women continued the campaign in the 1970s. Yet we see the gender pay gap widening so the fight must go on. She said we must fight this twisted and horrific government and cited examples of how the use of food banks has quadrupled in 2 years and some women are forced to steal food to feed their families. She condemned the vast amounts spent on war and arms when it could have been used for long term flood defences. She said that this is not a civilized society, but a barbaric one and quoted playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht: "If you fight you may lose, if you don't you have already lost".

Kate Smurthwaite, comedian and activist spoke of the need to break down gender stereotypes and encouraged delegates to speak out and challenge these false ideas of womanhood. She encouraged delegates to be confident enough to start up their own organisations if need be. **Gloria Mills**, Unison Head of Equalities brought the conference to a close with a rousing speech on the importance of the women's vote. She said we must be visible and on the streets. She was incensed that directors pay had gone up by 31% while women were parked on zero hours. She said we must fight this abuse of corporate and management power.



Following this uplifting and successful event the National Assembly of Women will be taking a motion to the People's Assembly on 15th March 2014 that captures the spirit of the day and ensures that women's unique experiences of fighting austerity can inform the discussion and that women are integral to the development of alternative progressive, social and economic policies.

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Join The National Assembly of Women - £20 (individual or £10 unwaged)

Annual affiliation fee for organisations: £20 (NAW branch or local group) **£45** (Regional) **£60** (national)

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