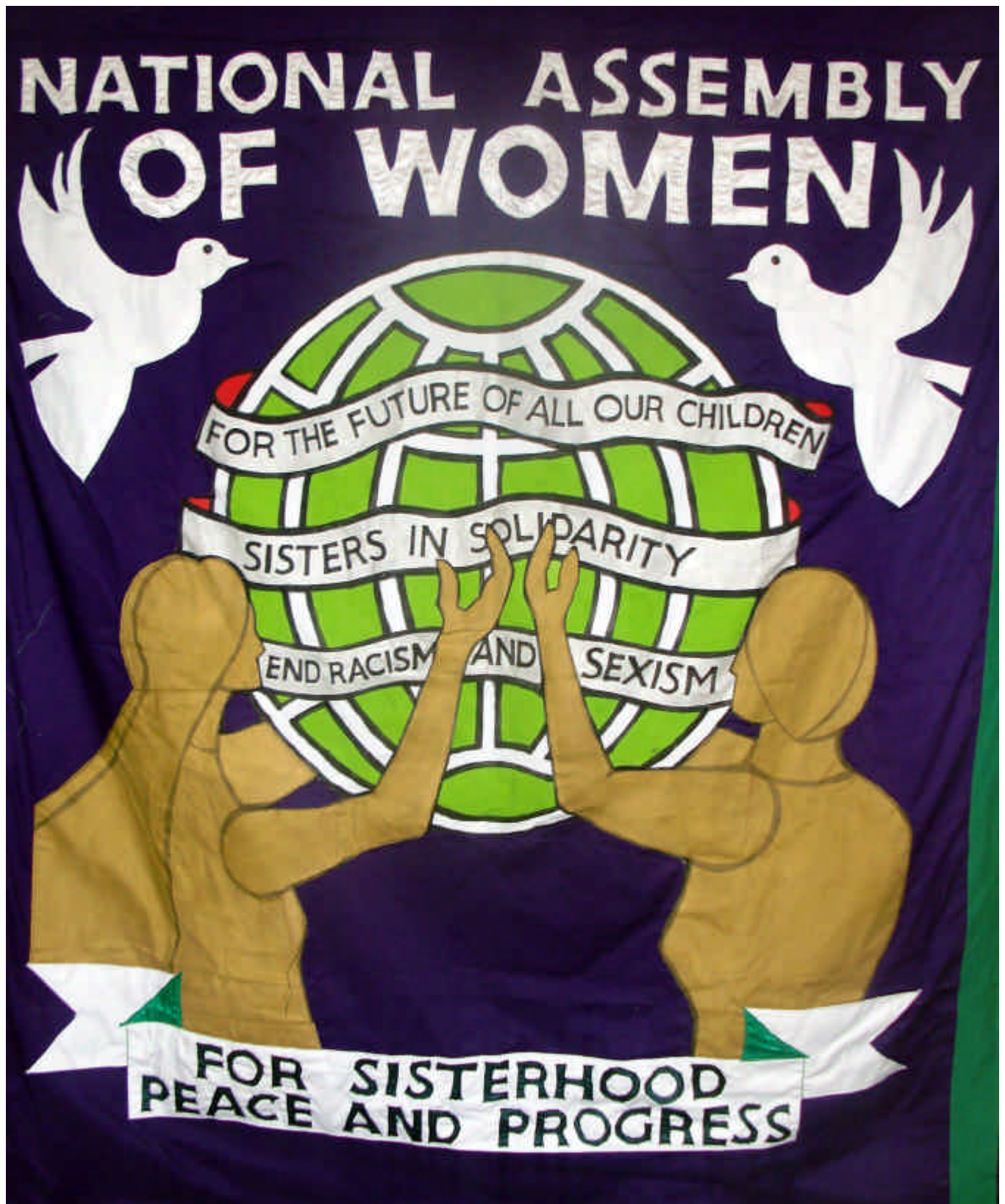


Sisters in Solidarity



A history of the first 60 campaigning
years of the NAW

1952-2012

On 1 December 1945 a Congress of Women was held in Paris. Delegates came from 41 countries representing millions of women who were determined to fight for...

- peace and to prevent wars
- for women's political, social and economic rights
- for conditions for the happy development of all children and future generations.

Britain was represented at this Congress by women who had been working in the International Women's Day Committee (IWDC) set up during the war in 1942 and from this was born the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).

All over Britain, women were wanting an organisation that would voice their needs, demands and opinions and on 8 March 1952 women from all parts of the country gathered in St Pancras Town Hall, London. By long distance coach, bus and train, carrying hand-made banners and overnight bags, they responded to the call of the IWDC, which had been campaigning intensively on behalf of women.

To the delight of the assembled delegates the Chair, Monica Felton a Labour MP, announced that the target of 1,000 delegates had been exceeded. 1,398 women were there from Scotland and the Welsh mining valleys; from textile and steel towns in Lancashire and Yorkshire and the shipbuilding centres of the north. They represented street groups, trade unions, women's guilds, peace organisations, political parties, International Women's Day Committees, parent teachers associations, old age pensioners associations and others. An overflow meeting had to be organised in nearby Westminster Hall with the proceedings of the conference relayed by tannoy from the town hall.

This wonderful response had its origins in the work done by the IWDC and in the 1939-45 war. The war had had a profound effect on women's lives. With men away they faced the horrors and hardships caused by the ferocious German bombing of cities. They dealt with shortages and blackouts as well as caring alone for families and children. Many women worked for the first time, doing jobs normally undertaken by men. They worked day and night in the factories, on the land, in the armed services, on fire watches during air raids and drove buses and ambulances.



Sisters Spring 2000 celebrating the 30th anniversary of the introduction of the Equal Pay Act

1,398 delegates, representing 549,700 women, come to London



Such experiences forged a determination and great expectations. Women felt that the sacrifices made by them and by men must lead to profound changes if they were not to have been in vain. Peace was essential; future wars must be avoided, and friendship developed across the globe. Women were determined to work for these aims. They felt that the dream of full employment, nurseries, equal pay, better housing and a free health service were within their grasp.

However, it was only a year after the end of the war, in 1946, that Churchill made a speech in Fulton, Missouri, in which he accused the then Soviet Union of being responsible for "an iron curtain coming down over Europe". It was this speech that heralded the beginning of the cold war and brought about a situation where our wartime socialist allies were now seen to be our enemies.

Women began to realise that their aspirations were in danger of not being fulfilled and out of the huge enthusiastic response to the call from the IWDC the National Assembly of Women was born.

They had to meet, however, without certain delegates. Three days before the Assembly, the Home Office brusquely informed the organisers that the Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell Fife, had refused visas to four women

from the Soviet Union who had planned to attend. Worse still, no foreign visitors would be allowed to enter Britain for the purpose of attending celebrations. Dozens of meetings, all over the country planned to welcome them, had to be cancelled.

Two women from Italy who had travelled 850 miles to be present were turned back at Dover and the NAW became front page news when the delegates gave their answer and sent the following resolution to the Home Secretary:

This National Assembly of Women representing a wide variety of political, religious and other organisations from all over the British Isles, condemns the action of the British Government in preventing the entry into this country of visitors from both eastern and western Europe.

This action is a violation of the traditional rights of the British people to invite to their meetings visitors from other countries. We believe that the isolation of peoples behind their own frontiers is a major barrier to international understanding and the promotion of peace. From this Assembly we pledge ourselves to work unceasingly for the elimination of all barriers of every kind.

Despite this setback the common problems shared by the women there brought them together with the determination to unite and fight for a better future. This prompted the *Manchester Guardian* to report on the following day that, "They - the women - were emphatically for peace, disarmament and the rights of their children, unanimous in condemning the Korean War, in their objections to the tampering with the education services, in their intense dislike of the rise in the cost-of-living and in their enthusiastic optimism that the power to improve matters lay with them".

No sooner had the women arrived in London than there was a demonstration to 10 Downing Street, protesting at bad housing conditions, whilst at the conference a resolution was passed pointing out that after 30 years of Parliamentary support for the principles of equal pay, women were still exploited as cheap labour. Women spoke of the resurgence of a progressive women's movement after the suffragettes and dealt with subjects from the effects of tied cottages, German re-armament, old age pensions, childcare, education, cost of living, peace and the need for more women in Parliament.

Pulling the strands together, Charlotte Marsh, a veteran suffragette, read the declaration from the meeting which said:

On International Women's Day 1952, the National Assembly of Women from all parts of Britain, representing many different organisations and activities, sends greetings to the women of all countries.

We are convinced that our country and its people in cooperation with the people of other lands have the power to ensure peace, freedom, and justice, at home and abroad and that Britain has a great future in a world of peace.

We express our belief that there are no differences between the countries of the



1952 NAW children's outing from Moss Side, Manchester
Barbara Switzer, former NAW President, is in the back row, third from the right

world which cannot be settled by peaceful negotiations and that an arms race can only increase the risk of war and endanger social progress.

Recognising that a better standard of life, a happy future for the children and full opportunities for women can only be realised in a world of peace, we pledge ourselves to make peace our first aim.

No country can make the most of its resources in industry, science and culture, without giving women equal opportunities to take part in all spheres of life. Therefore we call on all women everywhere to join together in support of the demands of the International Charter for Women as mothers, as workers, as citizens and act together for the defense of peace, for higher living standards and the right of children to health, education and a full life.

We in turn pledge from this Assembly to carry its message of hope the length and breadth of this country, working together with all women for these high aims.

For life - not death

For peace - not war

For the future of our children.

After the inaugural meeting had finished, hundreds of tired but determined women marched to the cenotaph where Pat Sears of the London Women's Peace Council, laid a wreath and declared "We must show courage for peace, for peace is no easy job". So a new movement of women was born.

The work then began. On the return home activities were organised for peace and demonstrations against the Korean War and German re-armament were prominent in many areas.

Sisters Spring 2006 campaigning for equal pay

"I get paid more because I've got a wife and two kids"

"You're lucky, I've got a husband and two kids!"





Sisters Spring 1983
celebrating 31 years of the
National Assembly of
Women

Ninety year old Ada Gibson, a NAW founder member from Liverpool recalled her visit to Chester station where soldiers were leaving for the Korean War and where she walked along the platform trying to persuade the soldiers not to go and kill other mothers' sons. She had been getting her message across whilst giving out fruit, until the officers realised what she was up to and removed her.

Such acts for peace and a better life were multiplied throughout the country.

In 1953 house to house collections enabled women to attend the second Assembly and in 1955 NAW members were in the 17,000 strong demonstration to the House of Commons against German re-armament, braving the charges of mounted police, during which several members were injured. They saw the re-arming of Germany as a betrayal of those that fought and died in the war against fascism.

Members organised themselves throughout the country to fight for a better education system, health care, pensions, childcare and they played a prominent part in the struggle against nursery closures and for cervical cancer tests and clinics for women, demands that were taken up by the trades unions and other organisations.

Activities in support of the French doctor Lamaze's method of giving birth were organised, Lamaze being the forerunner of another French doctor on progressive attitudes to childbirth, Dr Leboyer. But the thread running through all this work of the organisation was the work for peace.

However, the cold war cast its shadow over the NAW. Following Churchill's Fulton speech its effects felt their way into the Labour Party which began its bans and proscriptions policy against progressive organisations and the NAW with its policies and affiliations came under attack and was proscribed. This resulted in many Labour party women and some non-aligned women leaving the organisation. The NAW campaigned alongside the other organisations, for the removal of these vicious and undemocratic restrictions for many years, until they were finally swept away in 1973.

At the heart of the attack on the NAW was the decision to become an affiliate of the WIDF a decision taken in the belief that women's emancipation was not only national but international. This affiliation brought the members into contact with

women in what were then socialist countries, as well as those in other capitalist and non-aligned countries. Because of the contact with women in Socialist countries the NAW was deemed to be subversive.

Central to the work of the WIDF was its determination to defend women's political, economic, civil and social rights; to fight for the creation of conditions indispensable to the harmonious and happy development of children and future generations, and its avowal to fight without respite, to assure the world a lasting peace.

Through many years of struggle the WIDF united over 140 national women's organisations, covering all continents of the world. In its struggle for equality of women in legislation and in practice the WIDF demands:

- the right to work and equal pay for work of equal value
- the right to education and training at all levels
- mother and child care and improvement in living conditions for families
- the advancement of women in all spheres of political, economic and cultural life
- the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- for world peace.

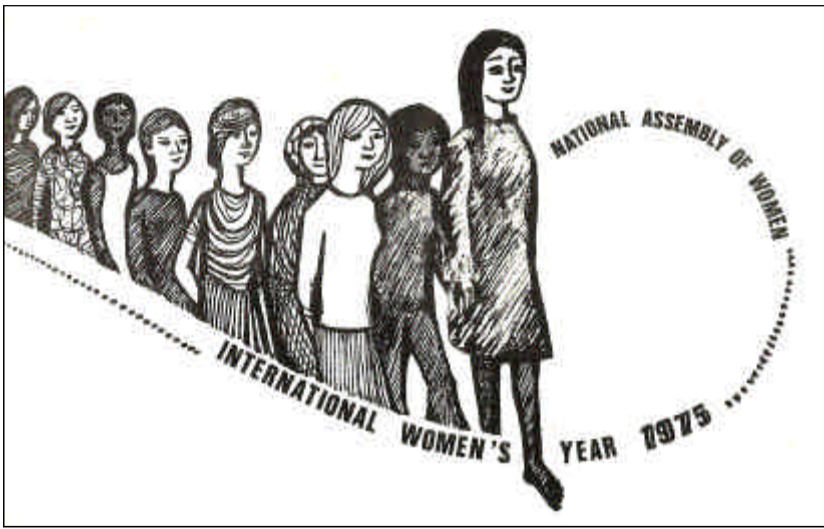
The tradition of observing 8 March as International Women's Day and the struggle for peace, democracy, national independence and the rights of women has been carried around the globe by the WIDF.

On the initiative of the WIDF 1 June has, since 1950, been observed as International Children's Day.

In supporting women in their just struggle for national independence and the territorial integrity of their countries, the WIDF supports the rights of all peoples to self-determination and a New International Economic Order and in fighting for democracy and social progress. The WIDF assisted its members in opposing apartheid, racism and exploitation.

Whilst carrying out the principles of the United Nations as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) the WIDF gained Consultative Status (1) with the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC), Consultative Status (B) with the UN





Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Consultative Status with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and is on the special list of the International Labour Organisations (ILO).

The WIDF was the initiator, at NGO level, of International Women's Year in 1975. This led to the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) and worldwide events being organised. These included: the World Congress of Women for International Women's Year in Berlin in 1975, with representatives from 141 countries and 88 international organisations; the World Conference *For A Peaceful and Secure Future for All Children* in Moscow in 1979 with representatives from 131 countries and 47 international organisations; the World Congress of Women *Equality, National Independence and Peace* in Prague in 1981, with delegates from 133 countries and 96 international and regional organisations; in 1987 and the World Congress of Women in Moscow *Towards the Year 2000 - Without Nuclear Weapons, For Peace, Equality and Development* with women from 300 countries and 47 international organisations attending.

The WIDF holds its congress every four years and is recognised by the United Nations where it works to promote women's issues on a world scale. In the last decade the WIDF has concentrated its activities on the basis of a regional structure with an elected Executive taking the place of the previous Bureau. Today, it would seem nothing short of lunacy for the Labour Party to proscribe the NAW, which has such lofty aims through affiliation. Such was the atmosphere at the time that many NAW groups began joining the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which was growing rapidly, leaving the NAW to

become just a pressure group. It was the NAW's membership of the WIDF that was to become its source of strength in the coming years.

In addition to the difficulties caused by the cold war the rise of the feminist movement, with its different shades of opinion on feminism, tended to fragment the women's movement, affecting the NAW. Many of its members became involved elsewhere - in trade unions, in the peace movement, in women's liberation, and in women's struggles overseas.

However, despite this, those active in the NAW felt that an organisation that seeks to unite all forms of women's activities was a vital necessity. During the following years it was decided, by those still active in NAW, that in order to give the movement credibility, there must be a constitution as well as the original aims and charter.

In 1975 the NAW jointly with the WIDF organised a very successful and prestigious seminar in the London Business School, bringing together women from Eastern and Western Europe and representatives from

below: Delegates and platform (Mikhail Gorbachov in the centre of the platform) at the 1987 World Congress of Women in Moscow *and below that* Former NAW Secretary Margaret Boyle (second from left) with delegates at the 1988 WIDF Congress in Paris



South Africa to discuss the problems women were facing both in Europe and in South Africa.

As the UN had designated 1975 International Women's Year there was increased activity in the struggle for women's equality. The Equal Pay Act and the Employment Protection Act came into being, with the NAW submitting opinions to the government.

Many working class struggles have taken place as a result of actions by the government of the day. 1984 saw the most vicious attack in the latter part of the last century, that of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, on the National Union of Mineworkers.

Again as in so many struggles women bore the brunt of keeping families together and children fed and clothed (some of whom were NAW members). However such was their commitment to the struggle that miners' wives support groups were born and a message went out to government that the women stood shoulder to shoulder with the men.

Throughout the country NAW groups joined with others to give what support they could. One member recalled that in Yorkshire, a heavy mining county, they ensured that every child had a selection box at Christmas and a chocolate egg at Eastertime. They also collected money and raised £800 - £1 for every child affected. Every contribution no matter how small was invaluable.

This experience brought with it a new era of activity and when Thatcher dealt her fatal blow to the mining industry, Women Against Pit Closures emerged and again women in trade unions, other organisations and NAW members rallied in support.

The regeneration of activity on women's issues throughout the UN Decade of Women (1975-1985) provoked new interest in the NAW, which had the broadest appeal to all women and was capable of coordinating the work. It was decided therefore that efforts had to be made to gain and build branches, seek affiliations and increase the membership and so make the NAW a force to be reckoned with.

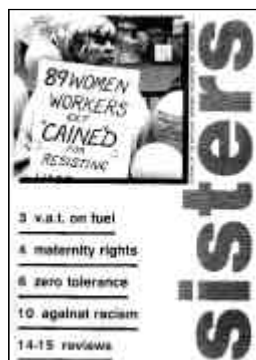
Since that date, much hard consistent work brought a measure of success. New branches were formed and many new affiliations made. National and international conferences have been held and members

right Former NAW President Barbara Switzer (back row, right) was part of the 1988 WIDF delegation to Afghanistan
below Former Secretary Val Duncan speaking at the women's collective in Antimano in 2007 whilst in Venezuela for the 2007 WIDF Congress



Sisters Spring 1988 featuring International Women's Day with Women Against Pit Closures in Chesterfield

Sisters Winter 1993 supporting the workers in dispute at Middlebrook Mushrooms



have taken part in many international events organised by the WIDF

Part of that success was the 102 strong delegation to the 1987 Congress in Moscow, uniting women from all walks of life, who became richer for the experience of meeting sisters from all over the world.

The commitment to participation in international sisterhood continues to be a major strand of the NAW's work, with members and officials participating in the various committees that organise WIDF work. In 1988 the NAW was represented on the WIDF delegation at a conference in Afghanistan on the role of Public Opinion in Resolving Regional Conflicts.

Despite problems of organisation the WIDF celebrated its 60th anniversary in Paris in



2005 in which the NAW participated. One of the highlights of recent years was the 14th Congress in 2007 which took place in Caracas, Venezuela, a decision reflecting the enormous changes taking place in Latin America. It was organised to coincide with the 10th anniversary celebrations on the election of Hugo Chavez as president of Venezuela.

Approximately 500 delegates from over 100 countries, including 16 from Europe, gathered to discuss and formulate plans to combat trafficking and merchandising of women and children; the effect of war on women; issues of equal social rights; political and social rights to work, representation, sexual health, education, social security, and the role of the media in representing women – a focus for the NAW delegation.

Delegates had an opportunity to visit and hear about projects in Caracas to improve conditions and opportunities for women and young people. They took part in a huge liberation march and were able to meet President Chavez and question him about his policies and plans for Venezuela's development.

The closing statement of the conference is perhaps encapsulated in the following quotation:

We seek a world where the rights of each citizen are respected, and demand the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women; displacement, trafficking and killing, including elimination of obstacles to equal access to resources and employment as the means to economic independence.

This history shows how the NAW has and continues to campaign on such issues.

With great joy and euphoria the NAW celebrated alongside its South African sisters the freeing of Nelson Mandela from his 27 year incarceration on Robben Island,



NAW Executive Committee member Pam Flynn in Beijing in 1995 with Vietnamese women weaving the world together banner



NAW delegates' report of the WIDF 14th Congress

Sisters Spring 2007 celebrating the life of Adelaide Tambo to the ANC (with Terry Marsland)



left Reception in London to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela. left to right NAW Vice President Alice Mahon MP, former NAW President Beryl Huffinley, Winnie Mandela right Delegation to China 1996 left to right Margaret Boyle, Vie Lawrence, Eleanor Lewington, unknown, Elaine McGhee, unknown, Jacqui Napier; front Leslie Roden, Li Hong Yan. The Chinese women were from the All China Women's Federation in Dalian, NE coast

the defeat of apartheid and, in 1994 the first elections for all South Africans. In the pages of *Sisters* (Sisters In Solidarity To End Racism and Sexism), the journal of the NAW, appeals were made for funds to help fund technological assistance in that election, and for help in establishing and running nurseries and schools. A highlight of the NAW celebrations was a reception jointly sponsored by the NAW, the Anti-apartheid Women's Committee and the Manufacturing Science and Finance union's Women's Committee at which sisters were privileged to have Winnie Mandela as the Guest of Honour. In 2004 the NAW participated in the conference following 10 years of freedom from apartheid. Much has been achieved and there is a determination to achieve much more. Key challenges facing South African women are the eradication of poverty, tackling HIV/Aids, violence against women and children, and access to basic resources.

An NAW delegation to the United Nations 4th World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 was just one of a series of meetings between women of the two countries. Some controversy surrounded the decision to host the meeting in China. Despite some reservations about China's human rights record the NAW fully supported the decision. Apart from recognising that China had made huge strides in terms of women's position from feudal foot-binding to 20% female parliamentary deputies in





Sisters Winter 1990

"Three wise men. Are you serious?"

place at the time of the conference (Britain had 17% female MPs!), the NAW felt that opening up China to an estimated 30,000 women, all eager to talk to Chinese sisters and report back to their own organisations, would be positive rather than negative.

Among the conference objectives were:

- to review the advancement of women in the last decade
- to adopt a platform for action around key issues
- to identify and remove obstacles to allow women full participation in development in all spheres of life
- to ensure equality of access to education, health care and employment
- sharing of power and decision making
- to promote women's human rights and eliminate violence against women
- to determine priorities for action 1996-2001.

The report of the NAW delegates gives eloquent testimony to the breadth of articulate and passionate discussion, which took place among the delegates, representing every area of the world. What was clear then and remains so today is that women the world over, despite huge differences between the developed and less developed countries, are affected in common by their lack of equality with men. Following the conference, at the TUC Women's Committee (also represented at the conference) the proposal was made to concentrate on three priority areas:

- introduction of a national minimum wage to deal with the increasing burden of poverty on women

- equalisation of statutory and contractual rights of part time workers and an end to the discrimination in the benefits system faced by women on low wages
- achieving a gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, quangos, judiciary and representation of men and women in governmental and public administration positions.

In 1991 the NAW had sent its first delegation to China. Following the conference in 1996, a further delegation went to China at the invitation of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and a return delegation was hosted by the NAW in 1997. During this visit the delegates had discussions with the Women's National Commission and the members of the TUC Women's Committee as well as experiencing some of our culture. These visits played an important role in developing further relations between the two women's organisations.

The impact of globalisation and free trade policies as pursued by the developed world, in particular the United States, had for some time been affecting disastrously, the conditions of life and development in the underdeveloped countries and in April 1998 a delegation from the NAW attended the International Meeting of Solidarity between Women, in Cuba. They met with almost 3,000 other delegates from 89 countries to "work with energy and determination to identify the problems of globalisation of capital and neoliberalism, with its accompanying globalisation and feminisation of poverty and ill-health and to seek to strategise for working against their dreadful impact".

As the head of the FMC (The Federation of Cuban Women) said in welcoming the delegates: "poverty is not the problem; poverty is the manifestation. The problem is inequality of distribution of wealth".

As well as hearing about these problems from delegates, they were able to experience at first hand some of the effects of these policies in the form of the illegal and inhumane United States blockade (illegal in that the United States imposes restrictions on other countries' trade with Cuba). At the 2001 United Nations General Assembly debate the blockade was condemned by 167 votes to three. Also the effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its consequences for trade; shortages of medicines and other essentials; a lack of

International Women's Day card published by the NAW in the 1990s. Linocut by Sonya Walters



resources for refurbishment and rebuilding and pressures from the development of tourism to replace loss of trade, evident in currency problems and a re-emergence of prostitution were impeding Cuba's development.

However, delegates were impressed by the education and health systems and the determination of Cuban women to fight for their country and, consequently, improvements in equality for women.

The conference concluded that:

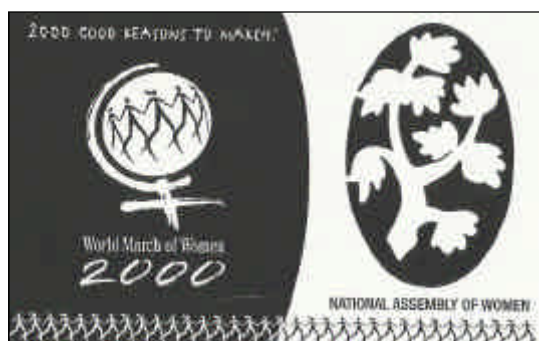
we all need the solidarity of each other, because we are facing the same forces of economic and social oppression. Although there is diversity of living conditions, our problems are similar. For this reason, we are joining together to build a women's international empowerment. This will allow all to live in conditions of social and political justice.

That conclusion is very much in line with the work of the NAW throughout its history. Its support for women struggling in Palestine, the Western Sahara, Latin America, South Africa, Yugoslavia and elsewhere has been ongoing with those aims in view.

Since the conference the NAW has worked closely with the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and has supported projects and appeals to bring Cuban women to Britain. West London Branch has had a long association with projects in Cuba and in 1994 began its support for the elderly home Bernardo Toro de Gomez in San Miguel de Padron built in 1942. In 2001 the branch sent an ECG machine and \$11,000 dollars to purchase a car/ambulance to take residents to hospital.

The continuing blockade has necessitated action which the NAW has supported, including the campaign for the release of the Miami 5, participation in the European Social Forum in 2004 along with Dr Aleida Guevera, Che's daughter, and other Cuban women activists. Solidarity for Cuban women has been highlighted by NAW's promotion of developing exchanges and visits between Cuba and the UK, including with women MPs and MEPs.

The NAW is a strong supporter of the "Boycott Nestle" campaign organised in the UK by campaign group Baby Milk Action. One and a half million babies die each year as a result of unsafe bottle feeding – the campaign focusses on Nestle as the market



leader and has exposed many instances of inappropriate advertising, marketing practices and labelling by baby food substitute manufacturers such as Nestle. *Sisters*, the journal of the NAW, highlighted the Oxfam campaign to expose the appalling business practices of Nestle in demanding payment of \$6m from Ethiopia whilst that country was in the grip of famine. Nearer home a campaign was briefly successful to get the TUC not to allow the company to have a stall at conference in 2003. Unfortunately it was back the following year. Still some work to do there then! Individual members of the NAW have continued to play a prominent part in the campaign.

In 1998 the NAW became actively involved in the World March of Women, an initiative taken by the Quebec Women's Federation following the Beijing Conference. Its theme was the Elimination of Poverty and Violence against Women. The objective was two years of campaigning culminating in a World March in New York on 17 October 2000, United Nations Day for the Elimination of Poverty and a worldwide postcard campaign to the UN Secretary General. Never has there been such a successful act of worldwide solidarity. Over 150 countries and more than 6,000 women's organisations took part and over five million postcards ultimately reached

above For many years the NAW has had a stall at the TUC's annual women's conference. *left to right in 2000* former EC member Phyllis Birch, TGWU (now Unite) women's officer Diana Holland, then President Barbara Switzer, former Treasurer Pat Peters

left The NAW contribution to the international postcard campaign of 2000's World March of Women

Sisters Summer 1989 and Spring 1999 continued the NAW's firm support for Baby Milk Action and the boycott of Nestle products in pursuit of the promotion of breastfeeding and babies' health worldwide



the UN. The NAW was represented on the delegation that met the Deputy Secretary General of the UN, delegations were also received by the heads of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington. The NAW postcard campaign was launched by Diana Holland of the TGWU at the TUC Women's Conference in 2000, and union members also participated in the New York March. The NAW, TGWU members and sisters from the *Strawberry Thieves* singing group participated in the march in Brussels, which was co-ordinated by the WIDE. These same *Strawberry Thieves* wrote and performed the English version of the World March theme song. At home the NAW President was interviewed on BBC *Women's Hour* the previous week. To coincide with the march in New York, a vigil was held on the steps of St Martin's in the Field church in London and demands to government were drawn up by the NAW and the *Strawberry Thieves* sisters. These were presented to Dr Mo Mowlam, then Minister for the Cabinet Office.

The demands for a total commitment to the eradication of poverty were:

- a redistribution of wealth through taxation
- an increase in the minimum wage to £5 per hour
- an increase in pensions and benefits in line with earnings not prices
- the implementation of the Tobin tax (a tax on international currency speculative deals) to support the world's poor,

and for the eradication of violence against women were:

- an ongoing nationwide public education campaign and programme
- far reaching reform of law and legal-

right Postcard published by the NAW in solidarity with the Trico women. Design by Val Charlton



Sisters Autumn 1993

"Big, strong and handsome"

"Sweet, delicate, charming and pretty"

Sisters Summer 1990
campaigning for a woman's right to determine her fertility



Members of *Strawberry Thieves* present Dr Mo Mowlam, then Minister for the Cabinet Office, the UK's postcards stating the demands of the World March for Women



judicial campaign processes to ensure fair treatment of women, their safety and protection

- properly funded high quality refuges and support services including financial help to women and their dependents
- that violence against women be included in the criteria for granting refugee and asylum status for women.

There was no effective response to this and the fight on all these fronts continues.

Of course the main focus of the NAW's activity has centred on work in Britain. It has continued the fight to ensure the right of women to feel secure in the knowledge that society cares about them and their children.

Among the many campaigns fought on equal pay, the National Minimum Wage, childcare, pensions and the environment, the following highlights will perhaps give a flavour of the breadth of activity undertaken. One of the most vital campaigns in its earlier years, along with many other organisations being a Woman's Right to Choose – the success of which was one of the most liberating pieces of legislation for women, David Steele's 1967 Abortion Act. The NAW has continued to defend it vigorously from attack by Private Members' Bills, such as that proposed by David Alton and successfully defeated in May 1988. The rise in recent years of ultra-conservative politicians and religious groups in the USA and pro-life organisations and their supporters has seen continuous attempts to amend the '67 Act and reduce women's rights. An example came during the passage of The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill when anti-abortionists submitted amendments to lower the upper time limit and make access to abortion more difficult. Through its membership of Abortion Rights the NAW has been to the forefront of the fight and it continues to support a woman's right to control her own fertility, with



access to free, safe contraception and legal abortion. Reproductive rights are central to women's equality and freedom. We must be constantly vigilant in defending the rights we have won.

Women's increasing role in the workforce, giving them more economic clout, has led to many campaigns around the question of equal pay, equality at work and improved maternity rights. Although the Equal Pay Act came into force in 1975 the battles are still being fought. In 1984 a case epitomising the struggle was taken to an Industrial Tribunal by a cook at Cammel Laird Shipbuilders, Birkenhead. It concerned the question of equal pay for work of equal value. The complainant won her case, but in assessing compensation the tribunal was divided in favour of the employer. The trade union member of the panel produced a minority report, which was influential in the final decision. The case went to the House of Lords who found in the cook's favour. It was a landmark victory, which benefited hundreds if not thousands of women in the future. The trade union member of the tribunal was a long-standing member of the NAW, Gail (Taylor) Griffiths. Tragically she is no longer with us, but she left a wonderful and practical memorial behind.

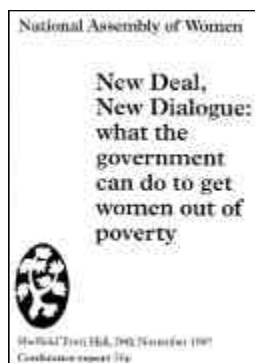
The election of a Labour government in 1997 gave women hope that finally the differences still existing between women's and men's pay would be overcome. Unfortunately that has not happened. Indeed a report by the TUC *A Fair Day's Pay*, presented on International Women's Day in 2000 to the Women's TUC revealed that

- full time women employees earned 81p for every £1 earned by full time male employees
- part time women employees earned 60p for every £1 earned by male full time employees.

The National Minimum Wage – highlighted from the Beijing Conference as a priority, and long an aspiration of the labour movement, was fought for alongside the battles for equal pay. It was recognised by the NAW as a measure which would help to lift women out of the poverty trap, along with improved maternity rights and increased benefits. When it came in it was set disappointingly low and discriminated against young people. The fight goes on to gain the sort of increase which will be of



The TUC celebrates 25 years of the Equal Pay Act. At the table, then TUC Women's Committee Chair Rita Donaghy, Barbara Switzer, then NAW Vice President, and Barbara Castle (reading the commemorative issue of *Sisters*)



1997: on the election of a Labour government the NAW organised a conference on *women and poverty* with the support of the Equal Opportunities Commission, MSF, Unison and Sheffield City Council

real benefit to all those earning low pay, but especially for women, including those who are single parents caring for children.

In May 2000 the TUC Women's Committee celebrated 25 years of the Equal Pay Act and the NAW published a special commemorative issue of *Sisters*. The question of poverty and its particular effects on women has been a focus of much NAW campaigning. In 1997 the NAW anti-poverty conference in Sheffield brought together a wide range of women's groups, local authorities and politicians, following the government attack on Lone Parent Benefits, with keynote speeches from Helen Jackson MP and Susan Brighthouse of Child Poverty Action. In November 1998 a further conference was held in Manchester, entitled *Meeting the Needs of All Mothers*, with keynote speakers from the Maternity Alliance, Manchester University and the Labour MP for Warrington North, Helen Jones. Some success has been achieved. The NAW's policy position that "poor health is often a consequence of poverty, poor housing and unemployment" had borne fruit in that the government has acknowledged that inequality in income distribution was a serious contributor to poor health.

During workshop discussions decisions were taken to move the anti-poverty agenda forward around the issues of, among other things, women and mental

Campaigning against poverty in 1995; *Give us bread and roses too*





At Wortley Hall celebrating the 20th anniversary of women's struggles during the miners' strike



health, child support, child benefit, and women and the media. The conference ended with a commitment to campaign for

- paid parental leave
- subsidised child care for low income earners
- removal of lower earning limit for maternity pay
- securing a minimum pension of £75 a week.

Progress has been made in all these areas but much remains to be done. Childcare costs are still astronomically high and beyond the pockets of many, especially women on low pay. The crisis of capitalism resulting from deregulation of markets, not checked by either Labour or Conservative governments allowed banks and big business to pursue reckless money making schemes unchecked. Gains made are now under massive attack. As so often it is the low paid, of whom women are the majority, who bear the brunt. It is they who are being expected to pay for problems they did not cause.

Over the recent past the NAW has produced policy papers and campaigned

on Equality at Work, Domestic Violence, Children and Young People and Social Exclusion. Through its support for the End Child Poverty Campaign, a coalition of some 120 organisations including children's charities, trade unions and faith groups, it has been involved in campaigns including a mass rally in Trafalgar Square in 2008 to urge government to keep its promise to halve child poverty by 2012 (a target not met and disastrously and disgracefully the target of eliminating child poverty by 2020 will also not be met). Some 3.9 million children still live in poverty in the UK, one of the worst rates in Europe, with all the consequences this has for educational achievement and life chances.

Another area of campaigning for the NAW has been The Charter for Women, a programme adopted by trade unions and women's organisations to campaign on three broad areas

- social policy (women in society)
- women at work
- women in the labour movement.

During the period since the inaugural conference in 2005 work has been ongoing to get the Charter into as many workplaces and trade unions as possible. The Charter was updated in 2008 in light of the erosion of women's rights, the continuing gender pay gap and pensioner poverty. It was also felt to be important to include specific reference to combating violence against women, and ending oppression against lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women. The advent of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 with its disastrous programme of cuts to public and welfare services saw the Charter determining to harness women's legitimate anger in campaigning and looking to spell out a broader vision of fairness based on a policy of fairer taxation and distribution of wealth.

As part of this programme the NAW has campaigned to expose the impact of such savage cuts and mobilise women to campaign against them. From the outset it was clear that the cuts would affect women more than men. No party had achieved a majority and none had done assessments of how cuts would impact on gender equality.

As Margaret Boyle, NAW Executive Committee member, so powerfully put it:

the men in grey suits pushed the women aside, locked themselves in closed rooms for days on end and emerged smirking with a new coalition manifesto written by Conservative and Liberal men... with no democratic legitimacy and no attempt to conduct any equality impact assessment of its proposals.

Pensions is one of the areas most under attack. The NAW has campaigned consistently over the years in this area, specifically on the question of women's pensions.

In 2002 the NAW briefing on Pensions, sponsored by Unison, the State Pension at Sixty Alliance and the National Pensioners Convention (NPC), was formally launched at a meeting in the House of Commons with guest speakers NAW Executive Member Eleanor Lewington and Rodney Bickerstaffe, President of the NPC.

Recognising that a serious cause of poverty among older women is poor pension entitlement, the NAW campaigns for the maintenance of and increases in the basic state pension, for a restoration of the earnings link and an end to means testing.

Since the General Election in 1997 the NAW has taken every opportunity to influence government policy by responding diligently to consultations in its areas of concern. There have been many briefings which have been widely used in the movement. Responding to the Turner Report and numerous government proposals and attacks on pensions the NAW has campaigned on behalf of women for a system based on women's needs in place of one designed by men for men.

At its AGM in 2011 it expressed its anger at the ConDem government's latest attacks on women's pensions, in particular plans to increase the state pension age to 66 for both women and men by 2020, despite this not being a part of any party manifesto.

The NAW's demands include:

- a basic, fair universal state pension linked to average earnings
- no means testing
- no increase in state pension age
- the abolition of higher rate tax relief which mainly benefits higher paid men (this would bring extra revenue for basic pensions).

The NAW believes there is no justification for further increases to state pension age.

A civilised society should guarantee its citizens a decent retirement, welcome the increases in longevity and act to promote equality across class, geographical areas and generations.

For many years the NAW has had connections with Wortley Hall near Sheffield in Yorkshire. Originally a stately home, it was acquired by the labour movement in 1951 and is used for conferences, schools, holidays and functions including the NAW annual general meetings. It has, in addition, become a place where groups of NAW members gather for a friendly relaxed family and/or friends weekend and where funds are raised for activities and to enjoy themselves at the annual South Yorkshire Festival.

Many of its rooms and wings are named after heroes of the labour and trade union movement – all men! A fact commented on by the women. Having brought its concerns to the attention of the Wortley Hall Executive Committee, the NAW were asked for suggestions, resulting in the quiet study being renamed the NAW Garden Room and commemorating Celia Pomeroy.

Celia was a member of the NAW Executive Committee from 1978 until 1989, and then one of the Vice Presidents and Secretary of the West London branch. A graduate and teacher in her beloved native Philippines, she had been an activist in the People's Anti-Japanese Army guerilla organisation which was instrumental in helping to defeat the Japanese invaders. After the war with a reactionary and pro-American government in place, the guerillas were forced to take to the hills and were eventually defeated. Celia had married William Pomeroy, an American who had served as a soldier in the American war in the Pacific, against Japan. He shared Celia's beliefs and convictions. Both became



Sisters Summer 1993 celebrated the life and contribution to Philippine independence and British socialism of NAW Vice President Celia Pomeroy

Delegates from the Japanese women's organisation FUDANREN meet NAW EC members in London in September 2011



right Richard and Rita Pankhurst at the 2009 Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture at Wortley Hall
below Ian Walters' maquette for the statue



Sisters Spring 2004 reported on progress on the campaign for the statue to celebrate the lasting contribution of Sylvia Pankhurst

Sisters Spring 1991 opposed the Gulf war and supported the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf



political prisoners as a result of their work for the national liberation movement. They were released after 10 years but Celia was refused permission to go to the United States and so they came to England where William worked as a writer and journalist and Celia became a teacher and NAW activist.

At the 2003 AGM life membership of the position of the first honorary vice president was conferred on Celia, a position she accepted with her usual modesty.

More recently a further blow for equality was struck when Wortley Hall agreed that the library should be named after Sylvia Pankhurst, following a suggestion from Sheffield sisters. The naming ceremony was carried out in the presence of her son Richard. Wortley Hall also agreed to host an annual lecture in Sylvia's memory. The first of these was given by Mary Davis in September 2003 and succeeding years have seen Richard and Rita Pankhurst among others delivering lectures in Sylvia's memory.

In March 1998 the Fire Brigades Union gifted to Wortley Hall a photograph album in memory of Fleur Lombard, a 21 year old fire fighter who was tragically killed in active service. Visitors to the hall are invited to place their tributes to women in the album. The first tribute was to Fleur herself, since then, among others, tributes have been added to Connie Seifert, a founder member of NAW, and to Mikki Doyle, an America exile from McCarthyism and one time Editor of the Women's Page in the left wing daily *Morning Star*. Many more will follow and will add to the rich history of women. The album is kept in the NAW Garden Room.

Never at a loss as to how to make their point about men's dominance, sisters in the NAW devised a way of making their point through SWOMP (Socialist Women on Male Platforms), formed to remind brothers in the labour and trade union movement that they do not have sole rights to expressing the views and aspirations of the movement. It has held awards ceremonies during the TUC week in September. These have been seriously glamorous occasions with extravagant earrings and a penchant for leopard skin patterns. Nominations flooded in, with fierce competition, and the winners could look forward to awards, which reminded them that more than lip service to women's role in the movement is required. Unfortunately of late pressure of work and time have meant that the event has not been held... but watch this space!

Readers of this history and long-time members of the NAW will be very conscious of its main thread - the fight for peace. Following the end of the Second World War hopes and aspirations were high. It is true that there has not been another world war but war has raged across the globe - notably Korea and Vietnam through more recent conflicts, in the Gulf, the Falklands and Yugoslavia. As in its early history the NAW has been working and campaigning, both internationally and nationally, against the evils of war. One of the NAW Vice Presidents, Alice Mahon (formerly MP for Halifax), was vigilant in raising matters and asking questions in the House of Commons, as well as visiting Yugoslavia during the Balkans conflict. This latter conflict gave rise to demands from the NAW AGM that year to "stop the bombing" and a special *Sisters* bulletin was published.

The NAW shares the frustration felt around the world by the ever worsening situation of the Palestinians. Israel, backed by the might of the United States continues an increasingly bloody and brutal assault on Palestine. At the time of the attacks on Gaza when thousands of civilians were killed and injured the NAW wrote to the prime minister, foreign secretary and MPs and many members took part in the marches and other activities that were organised to express outrage at the situation. The NAW supports the rights of the people of Palestine to their own independent State. 2001 saw the mightiest army in the world, backed by our own government, begin an



onslaught of relentless bombing of one of the poorest countries in the world, on the pretext of defending the world against terrorism following the appalling attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. The NAW secretary wrote to the, then, Prime Minister Tony Blair, urging caution in any response from Britain.

The continuing attack on Afghanistan, by Britain and its allies, prompted *Sisters* to reprint its report of the conference in Afghanistan in 1988 with comments from Alice Mahon MP on the situation today. In response to present day media coverage on the role of western governments and the Soviet Union during that earlier conflict, the NAW posed the question, "is government and media rewriting history today?"

The results of intervention to date have seen huge devastation all across the country with many thousands of dead civilians including large numbers of women and children. Women's rights have been severely curtailed with attacks on schools and on individual women who demonstrate enormous courage in the face of male reaction to their just demands.

On 15 February 2003 a huge and historic demonstration of more than two million people took place in London. Individual, families and organisations representing women's groups, trade unions, Christians, Muslims and many youth organisations, under the umbrella of the Stop the War Coalition showed their opposition to the prospect of war on Iraq. Despite this and

Former TGWU General Secretary Ron Todd with then NAW President Beryl Hufinley after she had been awarded the Frank Cousins Gold Medal for her outstanding work for peace

without the backing of the United Nations, the United States of America, supported by the New Labour government of Tony Blair, launched an illegal occupation of that country. The NAW position was very clear

- it was totally opposed to the war
- it called for an end to the crippling sanctions already in place which had over a period of 12 years inflicted massive harm on the Iraqi population
- it called for investment for rebuilding and economic recovery
- it supported continued weapons inspections
- it wanted UN oversight of investigations into human rights abuses
- it felt that through such measures the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein could be overthrown by the Iraqi people themselves.

Once again war and intervention has seen massive destruction and loss of life and women's rights have been seriously curtailed.

As those founder members recognised – as we all recognise – peace and co-operation across the globe are the necessary conditions for the fulfilment of our aspirations for equality and security for us all.

At home an important part of the fight for peace and against nuclear weapons has been women's camps at Greenham Common and Menwith Hill. The serious commitment of women leaving their homes, occupying the camps and on occasion being arrested and imprisoned has drawn attention to the fight for peace and gained the sympathy of new recruits to the cause.

The NAW will continue its campaigning around these and all issues, which are vital to women achieving full emancipation.

In keeping with its aims and aspirations it was fitting that the NAW became a Founding Sponsor of the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee. The Committee planned to erect a statue to Sylvia in June 2003 on College Green opposite the Palace of Westminster, to commemorate her life and contribution to the struggles of working class women, her tireless work in the poverty stricken east end of London and her total commitment to the fight against racism and fascism. A contribution that has been largely ignored in the pages



At the Women of the Year lunch 2010, Frances O'Grady, TUC Deputy General Secretary and NAW Vice President, Dona Feltham, NAW President, and Barbara Switzer

of history. To date the campaign has been unable to secure this site with the House of Lords being the stumbling block.

Brenda Dean, a member of the House of Lords, has lent her support and is attempting to move the issue forward and Valerie Amos, another member, has facilitated a viewing of the maquette in the House which was attended by a number of influential peers. The GLA gave a free site for it to be displayed, which was very helpful.

Ian Walters, a socialist sculptor, known among other things for his statue of Nelson Mandela on the South Bank, was commissioned to sculpt the statue. He produced a maquette for fundraising purposes (they can be made to order). Sadly Ian died before the fulfillment of the campaign's objective.

The NAW holds annual general meetings to elect the officers and executive who carry out the work of the organisation between AGMs. Branches affiliate to the national body and are autonomous within the structure. We have a website which we hope is informative and helpful, easy to access and user-friendly. Our journal is *Sisters* (Sisters in Solidarity to End Racism and Sexism) which is produced four times

a year. It tries to cover all aspects of women's lives, the political and the personal. As well as the main strands of NAW policy it has highlighted the Hope Not Hate campaign to expose and fight against BNP activity, children's rights, especially as the result of deregulation in the globalised market, and HIV/AIDs issues. A series of contributions from individual members over the decades, talking about their experiences as members of the NAW demonstrated just how important and influential the organisation has been to so many women. Member Lorene Fabian, in an interview in *Sisters* after she won the TUC Women's Gold Badge in 2007 said:

I applaud the NAW for its fantastic work on pensions and international issues... the sheer strength and breadth of our knowledge is awesome... I feel very positive about the future. This is because as sisters we support each other in struggle.

Women's struggle for changes in society have brought about a respect and recognition of women's rights and confirm the need for a strong and powerful women's movement, without which little would have been gained in the past nor will much be gained in the future.

The NAW has a proud history. We celebrate our 60th anniversary in 2012, and look forward to a continuing contribution to the strengthening of a united women's movement, for we know that our aims can only be achieved through women becoming a united, progressive force, and we are confident that we can reach this goal under the umbrella of the NAW.

We urge all women to join the NAW or seek the affiliation of women's organisations.

The message of the NAW 60 years on is the same as it was on 8 March 1952:

- For life not death
- For peace not war
- For the future of our children.

