

GAIL CARTMAIL, UNITE
ASSISTANT GENERAL
SECRETARY, CHAIRS
THE 2013 TUC
WOMEN'S
CONFERENCE



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P SPRING 2013

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women's power, workers' power

It is a huge honour to chair the 83rd TUC Women's Conference. I first attended as a delegate from my union the NGA in the early 1980s. The NGA was predominantly a male union, which made the experience of joining a conference of women from all unions across the UK just wonderful.

Like many sisters in the union movement my activism links strongly to a belief in feminism, women's power – and socialism, workers' power.

This year's conference is historic. We will be addressed by the TUC's General Secretary Frances O'Grady, the first woman to hold this position, a huge achievement for Frances and for us all. At last we hear a woman's voice in national media expressing the challenges women as workers face in balancing our commitments as activists, workers and carers.

Last month *Woman's Hour* ran a panel selection of the UK's 100 most powerful women. Frances was among the winning 100, placed at 11. This was a fantastic achievement although not good enough in my view. Why? Because having her at the top of the TUC represents the achievements of all the women in our movement whose power transforms the lives of millions of workers.

So I'd put her in first place and here is why.

Hundreds of women who will gather in London for the TUC Women's Conference include:

- Health and Safety representatives with the power to stop production in the event of a serious hazard;
- Sisters who as learning representatives empower other workers by kicking open doors to learning and upskilling;
- Equality representatives taking back power from the worst employers, intent on behaviour that belittles, degrades and discriminates – while building powerful arguments for positive equality at work;
- Shop stewards and organisers whose powerful collective bargaining creates the union advantage – unionised workplaces with better pay, safety and learning.

But having said all that, I think the *Women's Hour* list was misjudged. It reflected an establishment view of power. Trade union women know that real power is held in collective organisations that benefit the many not just the few.

Conference delegates will debate all the big issues of the day that are facing women workers, their families UK-wide and globally. Discussion will be sisterly with the warmest of welcomes to new delegates and first time speakers. It is a friendly conference, a learning experience. Over the years I have shed tears of sorrow, anger and joy



moved by inspirational and powerful women who from our ranks have

stepped up to the plate.

Among us will be sisters who mobilised and fought for women's right to choose and against a return to backstreet abortionists; women who against the odds battled for equal pay and put violence against women on the collective bargaining agenda; And women who hold in their hearts the true spirit of international solidarity, not fair weather friends but instead providing solid and practical support to freedom movements across the world.

Despite all the challenges facing working women we know the strength of our collective organisation. The TUC Women's Conference is our touchstone and I hope we emerge stronger and more determined to fight for women's power and workers' power.

GAIL CARTMAIL IS ASSISTANT GENERAL SECRETARY AT UNITE

trade unions change women's lives...



2013 marks the appointment of the first women as General Secretary of the TUC and we now have over a dozen women general secretaries of affiliated unions. Progress has been made and our movement is now more representative than ever, but the need to encourage women trade unionists to be trades union activists and leaders remains a vital part of the work we all do. Trades unions have the power to change lives, and women workers are an essential part of working life, and often the people whose lives need changing the most.

Union campaigns for fair pay and equal pay, to defend public services, and to give people a real voice at work, all touch on the lives of women, and being part of the union itself, being active in our campaigns and showing solidarity with those in struggle, can change women's lives.

The power of empowerment is

something that we sometimes forget as we get on with our day to day campaigns and representation of workers, but it was highlighted to me in a book I read recently by the American trade union organiser Stewart Acuff. Stewart talked about how being in a union and being organised enough to stand up to the boss did more for women than just secure a pay rise.

He said "The power they won on the job gave them the confidence and courage and sisterly solidarity to confront more personal problems. Their biggest rewards came from their new found sense of personal and collective empowerment and they began to assert their dignity in their personal lives. They learned to stand up to their men and husbands. Some left abusive relationships. They were no longer the doormats to many of them had been their whole lives. They gained a whole new sense of self respect."

Trades unions make a difference every day to people's lives at work and beyond. Inclusive trades unions valuing and supporting women workers can have an influence that spreads way beyond the factory gate or the office door. On International Women's Day and beyond we need to remember the real value of activism and the impact it can have, and celebrate the power of the union!

LYNN COLLINS IS TUC REGIONAL SECRETARY FOR THE NORTH WEST

scottish TUC women

IN welcoming everyone to conference, the Chair Margaret Boyd GMB, highlighted many of the events in which she had participated in the previous year – all of which led to contributions throughout the Conference, and will inform the 2013 work of the STUC Women's Committee.

Margaret referred to the STUC's *Unions Into Schools* project "I think it is important that the youth today understand trade unionism, trade union structures, and the importance of membership" and commended the Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee to which she and other members had given evidence.

"In February this year, the STUC Women's Committee and STUC were given the opportunity to participate in a roundtable discussion with the Equal Opportunities Committee in the Scottish Parliament. This I enjoyed very much, and this led to another meeting in the summer, and the Women's Employment Summit with the Scottish Government in September. The theme for all of the events was *Women in Employment*."

Margaret also drew attention to the joint work the STUC does with sisters elsewhere: "The most recent event was the Women's Council of the Isles in Cardiff, meeting with the Welsh, Irish, and English TUC Women's Committees. This was a powerful and enlightening meeting of women from the four Committees, with very passionate speakers and inspiring groups of women."

The STUC Women's Conference, held in Perth 12 and 13 November 2012, brought over 120 delegates, and many visitors and stall-holders, together. The Conference focussed on the situation facing women in manufacturing, and heard from many delegates about the workplace concerns on health and safety, lack of investment in training, and limited opportunities for women in the science, engineering and technology sector. Childcare was raised again and again – childcare costs in Scotland are amongst the highest in Europe, yet the workforce is underpaid and undervalued. Campaigning for extensive state funded childcare provision will be a high priority for the Women's Committee in the year ahead.

The international campaign focus was on Colombia and Mariela Kohon, Director of the Justice for Colombia campaign, gave a powerful contribution, reporting on a recent parliamentary delegation to Colombia, and emphasising that the actions and solidarity from trade unionists abroad was really making a difference to the political prisoners. Conference unanimously endorsed an emergency resolution on this matter.



Conference heard from a range of speakers, including Mary Turner MBE, GMB President; the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth John Swinney MSP; the Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland Margaret Curran MP; the Leader of the Scottish Labour Party Johann Lamont MSP; and Kathleen Walker-Shaw, the GMB European Officer. Guests from all the STUC Equality conferences also addressed the Women's Conference, and there is no shortage of ideas for joint work in the coming months. The attacks on all the hard won equality legislation at Westminster will affect all workers, and delegates gave many examples of the pressures in workplaces across Scotland.

Agnes Tolmie, Unite, was the recipient of the 2012 STUC Women's Achievement Award. Agnes has long been a committed member of, and was a past Chair of, the Women's Committee, and is the current STUC President. With the STUC Congress coming up soon in Perth (16 to 18 April) we can expect a high turnout of women delegates, and the voices of women will be heard in all the debates there too.

BY ANN HENDERSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY STUC

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE WORK OF THE STUC AND THE STUC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE, CONTACT AHENDERSON@STUC.ORG.UK

greek unions attacked

ATTACK ON TRADE UNIONISM: THIS IS THE REPORT FROM THE FEDERATION OF GREEK WOMEN OF A BRUTAL ATTACK BY THE GREEK GOVERNMENT AGAINST PAME UNION OFFICIALS WHICH INCLUDED FIVE WOMEN. THEY WERE ALL PRESIDENTS AND GENERAL SECRETARIES OF THEIR UNION FEDERATIONS

35 PAME union officials had an appointment with the Minister of Labour, Mr Vrotsis, in order to protest against his declaration that "the social-security system was built on the basis of clientelist relationships". When they arrived at the Ministry they were told that the Minister was not there to meet them (this is a steady tactic from the Ministers in order to avoid a face to face meeting with the union officials).

The union officials replied that they would stay and wait for the Minister to return. The answer from the government was a savage attack by police against the representatives of 35 unions of the workers of this country. They were brutally assaulted by the police and nine of them had to be taken to hospital with severe injuries. All 35 were subsequently arrested and kept at the Police Headquarters overnight, the next morning they were led to the Court of Justice where their trial was set for 12 March.

Huge solidarity for the 35 officials was expressed by the workers of Greece from the very start. A huge demonstration took place outside the Police Headquarters while they were being held overnight and thousands of people demonstrated outside the Court the next morning. Among them of course were the women of the OGE.

The Greek Government proceeded also with an abhorrent provocation when they presented photographs of the interior space of the Ministry of Labour showing damaged furniture, maintaining that the 35 trade unionists took part in such actions. The reply from the 35 was that "the class orientated labour movement does not have such a rationale and practice and that they are trying to set up a provocation against the working people's struggle".

Dear Comrades, it is obvious that the awful anti-labour attack by the Greek Government, the EU and the IMF against the working class and the popular strata go together with the state violence and the state terrorism in their efforts to threaten our people in their efforts to stop the protests. Our reply to their terrorism is NO PAS-SARAN.

We appreciate the hundreds of solidarity messages received from all over the world.

the latest pension reforms... **yet another**

It is little over a year since the Government pushed up the retirement ages of half a million women, by up to 18 months, with as little as five years' notice.

Now, they want to rush through an inadequate Single Tier Pension, in 2017, just four years away, and against the Pensions Commission recommendation of 15 years notice.

The Pensions White Paper was published on 14 January, and would normally be followed by a 12 week consultation period.

But no, this time the draft Pensions Bill was published on 18 January, and the Work and Pensions Select Committee asked to report back by Easter!

They called for evidence by 15th February – just four weeks. Not a timetable a voluntary organisation could practicably meet.

So much for any commitment to real consultation and dialogue!

the proposals are:

- Combining the basic and state second pensions into a single tier pension, for those retiring after April 2017, set at just above the level of the measly pensions credit .
- Increasing the number of qualifying years needed to receive a full state pension from 30 to 35.
- Abolishing National Insurance rebates for contracted out pension schemes, increasing their costs.
- Bringing in further increases in the state pension age (SPA), first 67 by 2028, and automatic reviews of SPA linked to life expectancy.
- Spending less on state pensions than under the current system!

We have long argued that pensioners should not have to parade their poverty, to get means tested benefits, but get a decent level of state pension as of right.

We have also argued for a state pension system which is based on the needs of women, not one that treats women's lives as the exception.

NAW is not opposed to the principle of a single tier pension, but we believe that fundamental fair reform cannot be delivered on a cost neutral or cost saving basis.

level of the single tier pension

The £144 single tier pension proposed is just above the current £142.70 pension credit level but it is set way below the agreed European poverty level of £178 per week for which we have consistently argued.

In our view the best way to simplify the system, and reduce dependence on means testing, would be to significantly increase the level of the basic state pension. The level of Basic State Pension was linked to earnings increases in the 1970s. The link was broken in 1980, and the Retail Price Index (RPI) used instead. If the link had not been broken, the Basic State Pension would now be over £160 per week, 50 per cent higher than now.

The move from using RPI as the accepted measure of inflation to the usually lower Consumer Price Index (CPI) has already started to reduce the retirement income of millions. Even the welcome decision to restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings is seriously undermined by the change to CPI and the current near zero increases in wages.

The state must provide an adequate income for all pensioners, sufficient to lift everyone above £178 per week. This means an end to the disgraceful position whereby the UK's share of GDP (at less than 9 per cent) on pensions will be near the bottom in the EU by 2060. Instead we should aim to join the top three countries, France, Germany and Italy, whose GDP shares will be 14.1, 12.7 and 13.6 per cent.

The question of affordability is not an economic question; it is a political question and here also we believe that the government is failing in its responsibility to create and lead an honest debate, instead allowing fear and pessimism to win the day. It could and should be our aim to be one of the best countries in looking after older people rather than aiming to be one of the worst. A decent state pension could be afforded if we increased employment rates to 80 per cent and introduced fair taxation policies including raising the upper National Insurance threshold as our GDP rose. The government must stop peddling the lie that there is no alternative to capping spending on pensions.

increase in the number of qualifying years from 30 to 35

The 2007 Pensions Act did bring some significant improvements for women, for those retiring after April 2010. The reduction in the number of qualifying years for the full pension to 30 has helped many women. In 2005 only 14 per cent of women qualified in their own right for a full pension compared with over 90 per cent of men.

Increasing the number of qualifying years to 35 will affect many women.

People with less than 30 years get a direct proportion of the full amount but under the proposed system, a minimum of seven to 10 years would be needed to get any pension at all.

In the existing system, a low paid woman, retiring with 30 qualifying years, would receive both BSP and S2P, a total of £151 a week, but under the proposed single tier pension receives only £123.

Countless women have been made redundant in this recession, with 30 qualifying years, and are now providing the only "affordable" childcare for their grandchildren so that their daughters can go out to work. How many of these will lose out?

abolishing the married women's pension

The existing system pays a married women's pension of 60 per cent (£65pw) to those married women who do not have enough qualifying years, perhaps because they paid the married women's stamp. If this is abolished they could be £28 a week worse off. There should be full protection for women in this situation.

state pension age changes

Our view is that increases in state pension age already introduced have gone further than necessary.

There is no justification for further increases to the state pension age. A

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ConDem betrayal



ELEANOR LEWINGTON
IS NAW TREASURER

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.

We are therefore opposed to the proposed increase in state pension age to 67 by 2028.

The number of people who will not be able to work to 67 is considerable, and will make even more people dependent on means tested benefits.

NAW would challenge the assumption that life expectancy projections should automatically mean working longer in any event. People have a right to expect a decent period and quality of life in retirement and it is surely unseemly for the government to keep pointing this up as if it was a failure of social policy that people are living longer lives than in centuries past.

abolishing contracting out

National Insurance Contribution rebates for defined benefit (ie. final salary and career average) pension schemes are to be abolished. The rebates are 1.4 per cent of relevant earnings for employees and 3.4 per cent for employers. The suggestion is that employers can increase pension contributions and/or reduce future benefits to offset the cost! There must be great concern that the end of contracting out will undermine good final salary schemes.

winner and losers

The proposal abolishes the S2P state second pension which, from 2010, gives better flat rate benefits to the low paid and carers. Therefore, although there will be some women who could benefit in the short term, the elimination of carer's credits for the S2P means many will lose in the long term.

The DWP recognises that there will be winners and losers – it estimates that in 2040 just 35 per cent will be better off, 45 per cent will be worse off and 20 per cent about the same.

There is also a cohort of women who are being treated absolutely disgracefully.

About 80,000 women born between April and July 1953 have already had their state pension age moved back by up to three months. If the new system comes into place in April 2017, they will retire just before, and not be entitled to the single tier pension, whereas a man of the same age will be. And they will not be allowed to delay taking their pension until they are 65 to be able to have equal treatment to men.

existing pensioners and those who retire before implementation of the Single Tier Pension

Excluding existing pensioners from the single tier pension consigns many older women to continual complicated means tested Pensions Credit which over one and a half million older people still do not claim, despite being eligible.

Effectively, the government is saying that it does not care about the unpaid caring work that older women have contributed to society, those women who started work before the Sex Discrimination Act came into force and who had no maternity rights when their children were born.

Rather than ignore existing pensioners, the government should immediately include the needs of current pensioners by:

1. Looking at mis-selling of the married woman's stamp
2. Making 30 years of contributions and caring sufficient to qualify for a full pension apply retrospectively so that women over 60 benefit
3. Crediting women who have lost out because Home Responsibilities Protection was not in place before 1978

the fundamental con

is that the changes are designed to be cost neutral, when what is clearly needed is a decent state pension which, we know, can be afforded with fair taxation policies and higher employment rates.

The ConDems argue that by making the system simpler there will be less of a barrier to save for an individual pension. Simply, they do not recognise the reality of the lives of many women who struggle desperately to provide for children and grandchildren, which takes priority over saving! The punitive cost of childcare also makes individual saving for retirement way high impossible.

The NAW will be submitting our views to the Department of Work and Pensions on this latest attempt to tinker with the state pension system.

What is needed is radical reform that provides a pension system based on women's needs, and to recognise that women's employment is often part time, erratic and low paid.

hugo chavez

The National Assembly of Women was deeply saddened to hear of the death of President Chavez and we send our condolences to the Venezuelan people and to his family. His determination to create a fair and just society based on equality and self determination lifted millions of Venezuelan people out of poverty. Since 1999 when Hugo Chavez was elected President he has shown his commitment to women's rights:

"As head of state... I will always support women's movements, to seek balance in Venezuela and thus contribute to the balance in the world."

The active involvement of women in policy making, reflected in the constitution, has placed Venezuela in the forefront of the struggle for gender equality. We are confident that the people of Venezuela will continue to develop President Chavez's vision and we wish them every success for the future.

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irish feminism: changing times

IRISH feminism didn't spring from nowhere in 1970. Margaret MacCurtain, who pioneered the study of Irish women's history, recalls the struggles of the past.

Every so often, when I look across the River Liffey at Liberty Hall, Rosie Hackett comes into my mind. Born in 1892 she became a messenger in Jacob's biscuit factory in Dublin. She joined the Irish Transport and General Workers Union when it was founded in 1909 and less than a year later she was one of 3,000 women in the factory who went on strike and won a pay rise. An activist, she encouraged the women yet again to join in the epic labour struggle – the 1913 Dublin Lockout which lasted more than four months – and saw some 20,000 workers on strike. When she was dismissed from Jacob's she trained as a printer.

She was one of the small group who endeavoured to print the 1916 Proclamation on a faulty printing press and brought the first copy, still damp, to James Connolly.

She was a member of the Irish Citizen Army and served with Constance Markievicz and Michael Mallin when they occupied the Royal College of Surgeons in the Easter Rebellion and was sent to Kilmainham Jail. On her release she re-founded the Irish Women Workers Union with Louie Bennett and Helen Chenevix and for years she served as clerk in the union which, at its peak, organised about 70,000 women, including bookbinders, contract cleaners, laundry, print and electronic workers. Later she took charge of the ITGWU's newspaper shop on Eden Quay. In 1970 Hackett received a gold medal in recognition of her 60 years' service to the Irish trade union movement yet she is almost forgotten in today's world.

Practitioners of women's history tend to look back nostalgically on the 19th-century origins of Irish feminism as a narrative that closed triumphantly with the winning of the vote for Irish women in the 1918 general election. But, as Hilda Tweedy reminded her listeners when the archives of the Irish Housewives' Association were given to the National Archives, there was no break in the development of Irish feminism. Each period was "a link in the chain", the title of her history of the Irish Housewives' Association. This effective pressure group persuaded the Irish government to introduce food and fuel rationing, free milk to schools during the 1940s, and the first consumer watchdog in the mid-1900s.

By then women had disappeared from the canon of Irish history. No wonder 19th-century feminism was regarded as a time when achievable goals were obtained. The passing of the Intermediate Act 1878 opened up



educational opportunities for girls and led to the possibility of admittance into university lecture halls and of taking degrees in medicine, science and arts before the end of the century.

The invention of the typewriter offered alternative opportunities. An incredible number of obstacles was overcome within 20 years. The growing demand for female suffrage brought the presence of women into Poor Law Guardianship, saw them exercising their rights in the married women's property legislation, voicing their criticism about the contagious diseases acts, and running the Ladies Land League while CS Parnell was in prison. The 1898 Local Government Act gave women the right of election to local and county councils.

Behind these achievements was a group of determined women and men. Mainly Protestant, they came from Quaker, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Church of Ireland backgrounds. In Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft set the agenda for a rights-based feminism with her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and for Irish readers Anna Wheeler – a friend of Daniel O'Connell – and William Thompson collaborated in a publication that became a blueprint for gender equality, *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, To Retain Them in Political, and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* (1825).

It was a slow fuse. Anna and Thomas Haslam founded the Irish Suffrage Society in 1879, some 20 years after Anna signed the first women's suffrage petition presented to the British House of Commons by John Stuart Mill in 1866, and it took another 20 years before women got a voice in local government and campaigned for parliamentary representation.

Nineteenth-century feminism was a middle-class ideology but the concern for equality was genuine. "We no more covet the name of 'ladies', we are all women", declared Josephine

Butler at one of Anna Haslam's meetings for the repeal of the contagious diseases acts, legislation weighted against disadvantaged women.

What was the legacy of 19th-century Irish feminism? Hanna and Frank Sheehy-Skeffington used the "votes for women" campaign to develop the ideology of equal citizenship which was spelt out in their weekly paper, *The Irish Citizen*. But with the setting up of the Free State and the separate jurisdiction of Northern Ireland, implementation of equal citizenship proved elusive. Second-wave feminism in the 1970s still awaits in-depth analysis. It emerged as the Republic joined the EEC and conflict in Northern Ireland erupted. Initially dubbed the Women's Liberation Movement it was rights based and demanded greater opportunities for women in the workplace, unemployment and sick benefits for all, State child care support and freedom of choice in lifestyles.

After two decades it was engulfed in the two "isms" – post-modernism and post-feminism. The speed with which Irish society succumbed to the attraction of unregulated wealth, accompanied by a celebrity and "hyper-sexualised" culture demands explanation. The gains in equality legislation of the two previous decades withered and, with the sudden onset of recession, all but died.

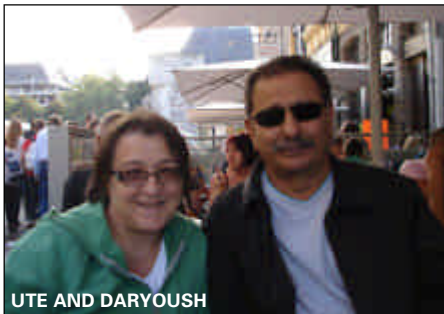
A few weeks ago in an UCD auditorium in Belfield, actor Rosaleen Linehan, in light-hearted conversation with broadcaster Olivia O'Leary, suggested that our hope for the future lies in the upbringing of children under 10 years of age.

There was a sudden silence. How shall we, a generation who enjoyed the benefits of second-wave feminism, restore our belief that we can raise another generation willing to make our society a more equal one than now?

THIS IS REPRODUCED FROM THE ARTICLE IN *THE IRISH TIMES* IN FEBRUARY 2013

BY BARBARA SWITZER, NAW MEMBER

let us rise...



UTE AND DARYOUSH



VENEZUELA

"THE great appear great because we are on our knees", said Jim Larkin; "Let us rise." When my path crossed with that of the National Assembly of Women, I started getting to know many great women who had already stood up and were leading others towards a more equal society. To mention all would take up too much space, but just to name a few: the late Val Duncan who as a young trade unionist possessed advanced leadership skills, and former NAW President Terry Marsland; Dr Madelaine Sharp (who told me that she became politicised during the Spanish Civil War when still at school) and Margaret Methley who dedicated much of their lives to supporting the victims of toxic chemical Agent Orange in Viet Nam. Barbara Switzer, then elected NAW president, has fought battles for equal pay as a female engineering apprentice, a rarity not only in those days.

As a new and energetic NAW member, I was soon coaxed into standing for election to the NAW Executive Committee in early 2005. And there was no looking back after that. Having recently been appointed as Chief Executive of children's charity London Play, I was ideally placed to work with other EC members to produce the NAW's first comprehensive policy document on Children and Young People. There was a great need to attract younger women to the NAW and a focus on children was to help achieve this goal.

I brought a different perspective to the discussions as someone who – whilst a life-long trade union member and campaigner – had not risen through the union ranks. Instead, like

many women who entered the labour market more recently, I managed to secure only short-term employment contracts without job security, often in non-unionised workplaces, and without accumulating any decent pension rights. On the positive side, such a career enabled me to pick up many different professional skills which came in handy.

I served on the EC for seven years and then resigned last year. Nothing to do with a 7-year itch: my plan is to spend more time in the European South once I retire. I stayed on as a co-opted member and contributed to the session Women in Society and the Family at the 2012 NAW conference. I will continue to support NAW from a distance, as well as offering my support to the women's organisation Movimento Democrático de Mulheres (MDM) in Portugal.

It was not only the battle for equality that motivated me being on the NAW EC. We have a shared passion for internationalism. Soon I was NAW delegate to a number of events organised by the WIDF – the Women's International Democratic Federation. I made a small contribution to help get the NAW back on to the WIDF EC, and was pleased to contribute to discussions in Portugal and Sweden. In 2007 alongside NAW President Barbara Switzer, Secretary Val Duncan, and June Plymen I participated in the WIDF International Congress in Venezuela, offering support with international communication. In February 2012, on an assignment to Tokyo, I gave an update about NAW and the political and economic situation in the UK to FUDANREN, our sister organisation in Japan.

Born to a single mother, a textile worker, (who was abandoned by my teenage father) and into a poor working class family which grew to six girls, I had to grow up quickly and develop independence and resilience. I became an atheist at the age of 13 because nobody could give me any proof that god existed. What a relief later to come across Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' writings on religion, as well as *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State!* And what great luck to meet my best friend and husband Daryoush, who not only supported me throughout but also was the inspiration for me to do a PhD.

Almost reached the word limit and still so much to say, but I really must go. Final driving lesson to take before my test. Closure of local A&E department to fight. Apple cake to bake. Children's play policy to write. International Women's Day to celebrate.

A luta continua.

BY DR UTE NAVIDI

agent orange update

AT a recent well-attended meeting, the West London NAW branch heard about the on-going horrific effects in Vietnam of Agent Orange – America's chemical and biological weapon of mass destruction.

Len Aldis, Secretary of the Britain Vietnam Friendship Society, gave a report on his latest visit to Vietnam. It is now 51 years since US bombers began the spraying of this deadly toxic upon the forests and rural land of Southern Vietnam. Four million people have been affected, including second and third generations. Thousands of people continue to be born with terrible defects which leave them horribly disfigured and disabled.

Agent Orange destroyed huge areas of magnificent forest and all its dependent plant and animal life. It destroyed crops, became embedded in the soil and flowed into the rivers. It got into the food chain which is why it is still causing birth defects.

Len gave us inspiring accounts of how people with very severe deformities were finding ingenious method of living with and overcoming their disabilities. Some have been helped by donations from overseas charities, which have provided wheelchairs, computers, artificial limbs and other aids. The Vietnamese are clearly grateful for all this help and for the 40 years of campaigning by the BVFS which raises money for the victims and works politically to raise awareness, so that solutions can be devised.

Some positive results to date include a recent meeting – arranged by George Howarth MP – with the Prime Minister David Cameron. This work is so vital because to date not one penny has been paid to the Vietnamese victims or to the Vietnamese Government in reparations by the US government, nor by Monsanto and Dow Chemical, (two of the leading US companies that made agent orange).



The West London NAW branch held a sale, which, together with donations, enabled us to give a cheque to Len to support this work.

BY ROZ CARTER AND MAISIE CARTER
(ABOVE), WEST LONDON NAW BRANCH
FOR MORE INFO SEE WWW.LENALDIS.CO.UK

silver action at the tate

DID you ever visit the zoo, or a museum, and wonder what it is like being a part of what is being watched? Of course, speaking up in meetings is a bit like that, but at least in meetings one is being interactive – people can reply. When one is the art, no communication is possible.

300 women had that experience on Sunday 3 February, when we took part in the Silver Action project at the Tate Modern Museum. Women who near to or over 60 were asked by artist Suzanne Lacy to participate in an action that “references Britain’s history of political activism to position older women as contemporary actors in the public sphere.”

In normal language, that means women would sit together in groups of four and talk to each other, looking at four questions:

1. What is different for you now, with age? What can older women contribute? What are the challenges we face?
2. Describe something that you witnessed, experienced or read, that might have propelled you to action or activism?
3. What is different for younger

people’s assembly against austerity

On Tuesday 5 February 2013 *The Guardian* printed a letter signed by 54 people including union leaders, MPs, celebrities and campaigning organisations, calling for a People’s Assembly Against Austerity. The Assembly is an initiative by Unite the Union in conjunction with trade unionists in a movement for social justice. The assembly will provide a national forum for anti-austerity views which, while popular, are barely represented in parliament.

The National Assembly of Women reaffirmed its opposition to the Government’s economic policy of savage cuts and the disproportionate impact on women, at its conference in November 2012, which is why we have added our name to all those calling for a People’s Assembly Against Austerity. It will take place on Saturday 22 June 2013 at Central Hall Westminster in London.

More information here: <http://www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk/2013/03/peoples-assembly-against-austerity-launched-in-the-guardian/>

ANITA WRIGHT
NAW SECRETARY

women (or men) today? How have values and perceptions changed since you were younger?

4. What needs questioning today? What needs to be done? What are you willing to take action on now and how?

While we were speaking, professional film makers were filming, a young woman was “blogging” and individually we were asked to come to a computer station and give one experience we had as an activist which was typed up and shown on wide screens around the room. For an hour and a half the public circulated amongst us, listening to us but not being able to interact or ask questions. It was a peculiar feeling when one’s partner (or grandson!) showed up next to us but we were not able to acknowledge their presence.

The women I sat with were interesting – a teacher, a chiropractor, someone involved in the arts and another involved as a producer/director. We came to activism from different spheres – the chiropractor from having been pushed into being the Mother of the Chapel in her first NUJ position. It was however, a very white, middle class group, apparently because the organisers had contacted organisations with those sorts of members.

Many of the results should be on the website of the Tate Modern, and eventually on YouTube.

I found it fascinating, both as a participant and as an observer – the experiences of older women are often lost in the pushing and shoving of modern life, and I was pleased it was being recorded. Precisely what it had to do with “art” though, is another question, and not one I can adequately answer, but I believe this is what they call “performance art.” And what a performance!

BY LAURA MILLER, NAW MEMBER

events

NAW Annual General Meeting

11 May 2013 at Wortley Hall near Sheffield; Keynote speakers from the trade union movement and War on Want; www.sisters.co.uk or email naw@sisters.co.uk

The South Yorkshire Festival will be held at Wortley Hall 6 July 2013 and will have the NAW’s 60th Anniversary Year as its main theme, with all women speakers

news from abortion rights

The past few months have seen huge changes to the abortion rights debate taking place in Ireland. After the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar in October, and the recent opening of a Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast, the coming months are likely to see reproductive rights in Ireland remain in the spotlight.

In the mainland UK, the appointment of the anti-choice Jeremy Hunt as Health Secretary has caused new concerns about protecting the abortion time limit, after a year which has already seen abortion services come under unprecedented scrutiny.

So we’re holding a meeting to learn more about these issues from the experts! We’ve put together a great panel of advocates and activists to update us on key abortion rights issues in Ireland and the UK, and we would be delighted if NAW supporters could join us.

Abortion Rights in 2013: Ireland, the UK and Beyond

Saturday 16 March, 12 noon
University of London Union
Malet Street, London WC1E 7HY
www.abortionrights.org.uk

join the NAW now!

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £15 for the annual subscription (£5 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is:

£15 (local organisation/NAW branch), £30 (regional organisation), £45 (national)

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