



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P SPRING 2021

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post-Brexit, post-Covid, post-women?



WITH the combined impact of Brexit and the Coronavirus pandemic, the UK is changing at such a significant rate that the post-pandemic world will bear little resemblance to what came before. It need not be repeated that this crisis has exposed the inequalities embedded in our society – so much is clear, with BAME, gender and socioeconomic disparities widening at an alarming pace. The real question is what a responsible policymaker would do now, and whether the policymakers we have are doing anything at all.

Women have been at the heart of the fight against Covid-19. They make up nearly three-fifths – 58% – of the 10.6 million people identified as “key workers”, putting themselves at personal risk to serve on the frontlines of the pandemic. This includes 79% of social care staff, who have tended to some of the most clinically vulnerable populations, and 81% of those in education and childcare occupations.

But women did not just bravely fight to keep our public services running, they also had to shoulder the bulk of the burden at home. According to research by the Fawcett Society, two-thirds of mothers did most of the housework in their households, much of which involved childcare duties (58%) and caring for other adults (30%). How did our country repay women for these heroic acts? By forgetting them entirely.

The ways in which women's issues have been dismissed during the pandemic are multiple, but let's start with childcare. Women lose out both when they are professional carers and when they are performing unpaid care duties for their own families. The vast majority (96%) of childcare professionals are female, one in eight (13%) of which are paid less than £5 per hour. Despite this shockingly low pay, the UK has some of the most expensive childcare in Europe, forcing many mothers to sacrifice working hours even in pre-Covid times – a factor consistently identified as a major driving force behind the UK's stubborn 15.5%

gender pay gap. During the pandemic, this situation worsened, as childcare facilities largely closed. In response, nearly twice as many mothers than fathers reduced their working hours, thus sacrificing pay.

This crisis was no secret, with campaigners raising the alarm from early on in the first lockdown, yet in both the Summer Economic Statement and the Winter Economy Plan, the provision of childcare was not mentioned at all – an oversight the Women and Equalities Committee described as “astonishing”, especially given evidence that barriers to childcare is a leading factor in employers making women redundant during the pandemic.

Between March and November 2020, 160,000 women were made unemployed and it is expected that this figure will have risen even further over the last three months due to the disproportionate impact of lockdown on female-dominated industries such as hospitality and low-paid retail jobs. While a similar number of men were also made redundant, the latest data shows that falling employment amongst men was largely driven by work loss among the full-time self-employed, while among women it was part-time workers that suffered the most. Women were also significantly more likely to be insecurely employed – such as on zero-hour contracts or agency work – where earnings and hours have fallen significantly more than among those with secure contracts.

These trends expose problems embedded in the UK's labour law framework, which has long failed to promote equal work opportunities for men and women. The inadequate provision of parental leave and pay, and the gender pay gap, have forced most families to stick to traditional gender roles in which it is the mother who reduces her working hours and the father whose income is relied upon more greatly. This, alongside the low wages and precarious conditions within female-dominated industries like social care, have destabilised women's work, allowing them to fall more easily into underemployment and poverty.

Disturbingly, another significant factor in job losses among women during the pandemic was a horrifying rise in discriminatory behaviour by employers – especially against women starting families. Pregnancy discrimination has always been shamefully under-regulated. Before any of us had even heard of Covid-19, one in nine pregnant women and new mothers were already being sacked or made redundant, one in five were experiencing harassment, and one in 10 were discouraged by their employer from attending antenatal appointments.

But now, even more women are suffering. By July – just a few months into the pandemic – a survey by campaign group Pregnant Then Screwed found that

15% of women had been made redundant since the crisis began. Even among those who kept their jobs, nearly half (46%) of pregnant women who were suspended from work due to their clinical vulnerability to Coronavirus lost pay as a result.

Reform is clearly needed, but the government's long-anticipated Employment Bill is nowhere to be seen and its plans to “build, build, build” put men front and centre by focusing investment into male-dominated industries such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) and construction.

Post-Brexit, the situation may just get worse left in the hands of a Business Secretary with a long-held obsession with eroding workers' rights (although he now claims to have experienced a Damascene moment on this issue!), a leading party that forced through a Trade Bill that leaves the female-dominated NHS up for sale, and an Equalities Minister who promised to move the focus of the Equality and Human Rights Commission away from women.

Perhaps this government's attitude towards women can best be seen in Chancellor Rishi Sunak's dismissive response to news that his Self-Employment Income Support Scheme had short-changed around 75,000 mothers because the programme he designed had based their allowance on their income during maternity leave rather than their normal earnings. Self-employment has its “ups and downs... for all sorts of reasons,” he retorted, “whether maternity, ill health or others”.

It's clear that women will not find an equal footing in the workplace until employment is made secure, female-dominated sectors like care are no longer devalued, and families are supported by their employers to allow mothers and fathers to equalise responsibilities for childcare.

We, at the Institute of Employment Rights, propose that insecure work is abolished through the introduction of a universal employment status of ‘worker’ that affords all people with the full suite of workers' rights from day one on the job; paternity leave and pay should be improved to help women return to work; sectoral collective bargaining should be promoted in female-dominated sectors like social care to lift pay and conditions; and no one should be allowed to sack a pregnant woman without the approval of an independent labour inspector.

These changes would require a wholesale shift in the government's attitude to both work and women, but what better way could we respond to a time of extraordinary change other than through extraordinary changes?

SARAH GLENISTER
NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICER
INSTITUTE OF EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS
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no empty slogans. time to **campaign**



JANE STEWART LOOKS AT THE OPTIONS FOR TRADE UNION WOMEN FOR 2021. SHE WILL CHAIR THE TUC WOMEN'S CONFERENCE IN 2022

THERE'S NO TUC WOMEN'S CONFERENCE THIS YEAR AS SUCH, INSTEAD THERE WILL BE AN OPEN-TO-ALL-WOMEN EVENT WITH THREE DEBATES AND FOUR PANEL DISCUSSIONS DURING 3-5 MARCH. REGISTER HERE WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/WOMENSCONFERENCE2021

I have operated for 40 years to try and progress women's rights. I have achieved this where I have control in my workplace. I first attended a TUC Women's Conference in the '90s and it taught me to cement women's struggles in every aspect of the labour movement, and I have done this with determination built up by sisters who share our goal of true equality. I have described my path to embed the importance of women having a seat at the table. It underpins the importance of collective bargaining and demonstrates that where women have a voice, progressive policies and equality happen.

As women working on the frontline of manufacturing, Unite's National Women's Committee sees the real and devastating impact of the government's economic policy on our industries, our pay, and our communities.

Our starting point is that economic policy matters to women, it impacts on all aspects of our lives, it is essential we have a voice in framing economic policy.

We have the greatest challenges facing us, given the impact on the UK economy of: Covid-19; our trading relationships post-Brexit; automation and digitalisation; and the growth of global corporations who seem to believe they are exempt from contributing to our taxes.

It's all too easy for remote investors to asset-strip companies, close down production and sell the land to the highest bidder, often for luxury housing rather than producing the goods that are the backbone of economic recovery.

This has had a devastating impact on women's earnings. We have been the pri-

mary victims of the drive to a low-pay, low-skill economy based on zero-hours contracts.

We urgently need to see support for collective bargaining, job security and a return to investing in our skills and pensions, underpinned by economic policy and labour market regulation.

Protecting our public services from privatisation; fair and ethical trade with the Global South; protecting workers' rights; social and environmental protections; no hard border on the island of Ireland; freedom of movement of people; support for industrial development.

We also have the immediate and existential threat of climate change. We need to deliver a green new deal that works for working people, one that does not leave women behind.

We urgently need to invest in a just transition that delivers quality green jobs, one that promotes co-operation and innovation, and one that benefits our communities. Public ownership of energy production, distribution and supply is a critical part of this.

There is deep and lasting mistrust in many communities who remain scarred from the closure of the coal mining industry. We need to develop a conversation to show that the industrial strategy can work for working people.

And we need to ensure that business delivers on its legal equality obligations, to ensure that women are able to attain well-paid, secure jobs as part of the just transition: apprenticeships in engineering; tackling entrenched gender-based occupational segregation; and equal pay auditing.

Our movement must continue to battle to protect our women members, and all members, against Covid-19 – the most

significant health and economic crisis of our generation.

The whole union movement needs to work tirelessly to persuade the government to do more to support working people. We must campaign to protect jobs and pull out all the stops to find new ways of working and new products to manufacture.

Women members in Unite know what is in the bigger picture that will make a real difference to advancing a trade union women's agenda:

Economic justice, social justice, climate justice, peace and human rights, common ownership of land and the means of production, migrant rights, workers' rights, devolution of power, and equality.

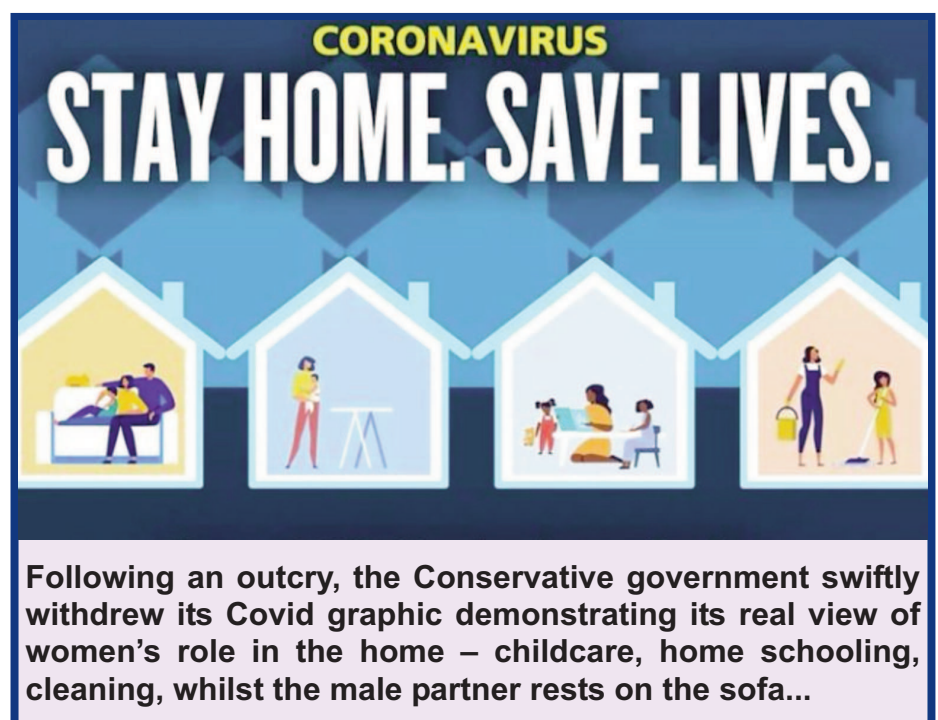
We got off to a good start this year with the election of Unison's first woman general secretary Christina McAnea. Who knows, maybe Unite will see its first woman GS, Sharon Graham – already steering a path on organising and collectivism.

A rallying call from me is:

- Women be heard
- Women be Reps
- Move over brother this is our time.
- From keyboard to kerbside we will fight for better pay, a better future and progressive change that puts People before Profit.

We have all the ammunition to effect these changes, through collective bargaining, communal action. We are the fabric of society – this is our time.

JANE STEWART IS A SENIOR TECHNOLOGIST IN THE CHEMICAL SECTOR; A DEPUTY CONVENOR; ON UNITE'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE; CHAIR OF ITS WOMEN'S COMMITTEE; AND A MEMBER OF THE TUC GENERAL COUNCIL



from behind the ppe...



It is almost a year to the day since the first national lockdown, a year that has seen tremendous tragedy, and one that has exposed beyond any doubt the widening gap between the richest in our society and the poorest. It has been a year of phenomenal public support for essential workers, a group that I am proud to be part of.

The NHS is held as an exemplar of public healthcare services worldwide and an organisation I joined last year as a newly qualified physiotherapist. I was able to change careers and retrain in my mid-30s due to an NHS bursary, for which my university fees and a small annual award was paid. Bursaries for nurses and allied health professions, such as physios, were scrapped in 2016. Thanks to a politically aware upbringing, public service is woven into my being and, although not a condition of the bursary, I joined the NHS and East Sussex Healthcare trust in August 2019. These first years of my practice have held unprecedented professional and personal challenges. Yet it has been a crucible for forging my beliefs about what is essential in our society.

On a daily basis, myself and my colleagues 'gown up', 'glove up' and don our visors, decorated with our names and smiley faces, to try to communicate our kindness from behind our surgical masks. Throughout this pandemic, I have seen how hard my colleagues work as they care for the most vulnerable in our societies, the elderly, the young, the sick and dying and their families. We have adapted to all that has been asked, the constantly changing requirements of infection control measures and PPE, changes to shift patterns, changing roles, additional hours, additional responsibilities and more. We have survived this pandemic and its lockdowns with responsibilities outside of our working lives too, with families, children and our own loved ones to

care for. These extraordinary humans have gone above and beyond their emotional, physical and mental capacity. The cost of this is unquantifiable.

Public support for the NHS has been overwhelming. Local companies and individuals donating and delivering care parcels of food, hand cream and biscuits have boosted morale. Notable national fundraising campaigns have raised millions for the NHS and the weekly 'Clap for Heroes' initiative has made audible the public's appreciation.

However, claps do not pay the bills! The NHS is not a charity. It should be a public service completely free at the point of care, funded through efficient and proportionate taxation. It should not be bolstered by charitable giving from those already poorest and most vulnerable in our society, whilst those with the largest incomes evade and avoid taxation by a government that encourages such behaviour. This pandemic has revealed how a well-funded, functioning healthcare system is a priority in our society. That begins with a decent wage.

Many NHS staff, and those who work for the private companies who profit from the systematic dismantling and asset-stripping of the NHS over successive governments, are not paid liveable wages. A staggering four in 10 of NHS workers receive state benefits. The NHS was founded in the aftermath of WW2 when the UK economy was comparatively worse than it is today. The national debt exceeded that of when the Tory party launched 10 years of austerity, a decade that saw public service workers experience pay freezes, which is a pay cut when inflation persists in increasing living costs. In 2018, the 'Agenda for Change' pay deal was negotiated for NHS staff, a three year path out of wage stagnation. We edge closer to a new financial year and a new NHS pay review is being kicked down the road by this

government.

Evidence submitted to the NHS pay review body by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy showed 80% of NHS physiotherapists asked carry out unpaid overtime on a regular basis. 58% of respondents also considered leaving the NHS in the last year, a sentiment I doubt is unique to physiotherapists. This is a measure of the UK government's failure to financially recompense and recognise the value of the people who work in the NHS. Waiting for a national crisis, such as coronavirus, to recognise their worth is a travesty.

I will keep donning my uniform, PPE and graffitied visor and keep working in the NHS because I truly believe that it is a privilege to care for others. I urge you, in the strongest of terms, not to just clap on my behalf and all NHS workers. I urge you start shouting. And keep shouting until this government hears. Write to your local MP, as I have done and call for an early and significant pay rise for NHS staff and sufficient funding and protection to safeguard the NHS for the future.

MEGAN WRIGHT IS A MEMBER OF THE NAW AND OF THE CHARTERED SOCIETY OF PHYSIOTHERAPY

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
#WITHNHSTAFFCAMPAIGN AND TO FIND OUT WHAT YOUR MP IS UP TO VISIT
WWW.THEYWORKFORYOU.COM

THIS ARTICLE INCLUDES EDITED EXTRACTS OF EMAILS SENT EACH WEEK TO THE AUTHOR'S MP SINCE THE BEGINNING OF JANUARY. A REPLY WAS FINALLY RECEIVED A MONTH LATER – THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES...



A 5% pay rise for NHS staff would cost £330m
– less than the figure on the side of the Brexit bus.
A study by researchers LONDON ECONOMICS commissioned by NHS unions shows that by increasing the wages of England's 1 million nurses, midwives, health professionals and NHS support staff, the Treasury would recover 81% of the cost through taxes and staff would boost the economy because they spend more in local businesses. www.londoneconomics.co.uk



MEGAN DOBNEY REVIEWS ANNE AND BETTY – UNITED BY THE STRUGGLE

THIS is not a history of the miners' strike, nor of the Women Against Pit Closures. Instead, it is the autobiographies of two women who were central to both.

We start at school, then college and work, then marriage and pregnancy (not necessarily in that order).

It's quite funny at times – vegetarians at Greenham Common wolfing bacon sandwiches (well who can resist?). Outdoor toilets in Yorkshire (same as in Lincolnshire of course). Imperfect husbands – one the President of the Yorkshire National Union of Mineworkers, one a working miner but a "good for nothing lazy miner who hardly did a hand's stir at home".

This government might have paid tens of thousands to develop the three word Covid-19 slogan as the ultimate propaganda tool *Face Hands Space* but it was alive and well in the 1980s – **Coal Not Dole**.

And then we get to Woman Against Pit Closures – a movement much wider than opposing the job cuts. Engaging "ordinary working-class women" in the soup kitchens and feeding the miners and their families. Picketing – changing shifts to attend (Betty at Empire Stores, Anne at the Co-op) and getting arrested. There were challenges and tensions in the organisation and the Barnsley Miners' Wives Action Group was formed, but remained within the national organisation. And the picketing and fundraising continued.

The strike ends. One of the lads came up to Anne and almost whispered "Anne, I want my wife back now". She recalls "I knew that wasn't going to happen. She had changed like a lot of us women had." They realised that they no longer had to be just a mother or a wife, they had a political education and a wider view. Betty says "women like me have become involved in things far beyond the normal life we had before. I have become interested in issues around social justice, the peace movement, the health service, cuts in social provisions, strikes for better wages and conditions". This is the legacy of activism and leadership.

Betty goes to Northern College to do a diploma in social and community studies and Anne struggles with the public acceptance of many of the lies told in the media about Arthur. Betty breaks with her husband – "the best £800 I ever spent" (for the divorce).

In 1992 the pit closure programme continues, and Anne and Betty continue their involvement in camps, demos, occupations and sit ins. They both retire from

work; Anne is divorced from Arthur.

So, we have life, death, and everything in between...

If you remember the miners' strike of 1984, you'll also remember the living and social conditions of the 1950s and 60s so you'll gallop down memory lane with Anne and Betty. If you're younger you'll absorb it as you read. As Ian Clayton, listener and putter-together of the tales says "they are working class heroines of the finest order. These are their stories in their voices."

thoughts to end with:

Betty "I'm still available for picket lines, demonstrations and direct action – that will never stop".

Anne "I am a woman who stood up and I'm still standing up".



ANNE AND BETTY: UNITED BY THE STRUGGLE BY ANNE SCARGILL AND BETTY COOK, WITH IAN CLAYTON
ROUTE PUBLISHING, HARDBACK, 256PP, £20

the 1984 to 85 miners' strike

THE strike started in March 1984 following the announcement by the National Coal Board that 20 collieries would close with 20,000 jobs to go. At the time there were 174 working pits with 231,000 employees (in 1922 one million people were employed in around 1,000 collieries).

Arthur Scargill was President of the National Union of Mineworkers having previously been President of the union's Yorkshire region. He claimed the government intent was to close down the industry pit by pit as they became uneconomic (not exhausted) – this was denied by government and the NCB but we can note that the last deep pit closed five years ago following privatisation of the remaining pits in 1994. And there are clear indications that this was the case in government papers released in 2014 after the expiry of the 30 year embargo.

The geographic nature of the mining industry meant that whole communities were devastated when pits closed – there were seldom other employment opportunities nearby. The strike was almost universally observed in South Wales, Yorkshire, Scotland, North East England and Kent, but there was less support in the Midlands and in North Wales.

The mass media demonised the picketing, the police acted as agents of government policy and beatings and violence characterised their approach. The South Yorkshire Police were in the vanguard of this – in June 1991 they paid out £425,000 in compensation to 39 miners for assault, wrongful arrest unlawful detention and malicious prosecution following their actions at "The Battle of Orgreave" – a police riot at the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire. The BBC joined in the political game switching the

sequence of events in their broadcast film of the event.

The Orgreave Truth & Justice Campaign <https://otjc.org.uk/> continues to campaign for an independent public enquiry into South Yorkshire Police actions. Note that this is the same police force that demonised football fans and lied about its actions during and after the Hillsborough football disaster...

Women Against Pit Closures brought thousands of women into political activity. Rapidly moving from feeding strikers and their families to projecting women's voices into what had been an overwhelmingly male dominated industry it inspired hundreds of thousands to support the dispute.

During the miners' strike over 11,000 people were arrested – including Anne and Betty. Hundreds were imprisoned and thousands were sacked after picketing, even when no charges were brought.

The strike divided communities, trade unions (the pit deputies' union NACODS did not strike, Nottinghamshire miners set up the scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers, and the Guardian newspaper reported that papers released in 2005 showed the NCB had an informant in trade union umbrella organisation the TUC), and even families.

Having said that solidarity was forthcoming from across the trade union movement with food, children's toys and money flooding in to the NUM.

The strike ended in March 1985. The trade union movement would be stronger had the miners been successful. The resonance with the printers' Wapping dispute against Rupert Murdoch are clear to see. The movement reaps what it sows – if the support is insufficient the crop is inadequate.

the campaign for claudia

THE CAMPAIGN FOR A MURAL OF CLAUDIA JONES IN CAMDEN BY SHEZAN RENNY

WE are working to commission a mural of Claudia Jones on the wall of our end-of-terrace home in Camden, round the corner from where she is buried in Highgate Cemetery. The wall faces a small children's park, the 3-Point-Park, locally known as Snake Park on account of its colourful snake benches, a place that parents and toddlers bring to life every afternoon.

The site is also on a walking tour route that includes visiting Claudia Jones' grave in the Cemetery.

A mural in our area celebrating this wonderful socialist fighter for civil rights would be a fitting tribute to a Camden hero who lived and died in the borough.

We will involve the local community in this project with the planning, implementation, and celebration of the completion of the project. Ideally, the mural will be designed by young artists from Camden and the surrounding area and we intend to run a competition to this end. The local community will be involved in choosing the winning design and we envisage an unveiling ceremony with local press coverage.

We believe that a mural of this important cultural figure, who is almost entirely overlooked, would not only be appropriate, but would also be an enhancement of the cultural history of our amazing part of Camden. She is a person we should all be very proud of – she did so much. Having a mural of her here would not only reflect that, but will prompt people to find out more about her life. It would raise spirits and inspire – a new vibrant and colourful landmark for everyone to enjoy.

This project is supported by the 1980s Camden Council youth worker, Winston Pinder, who launched a campaign to raise money for a stone to be erected at Claudia Jones' grave in Highgate Cemetery. As a member of the Communist



TOP LEFT SHEZAN RENNY IN FRONT OF THE DESIGNATED WALL
PIC DAN CARRIER DCARRIER@CAMDENNEWJOURNAL.CO.UK

TOP CLAUDIA JONES
WATERCOLOUR

BELOW CLAUDIA JONES PIC BCA

BOTTOM LEFT POSTAGE STAMP
ISSUED IN 2008 IN ROYAL MAIL'S
WOMEN OF DISTINCTION SERIES



Party's Caribbean committee, Winston had been part of Claudia's official welcome party when she arrived in the UK in 1955 and would go on to sell the West Indian Gazette outside Kentish Town tube station after collecting copies from her home in Lisburne Road, Gospel Oak.



We also have the support of a local journalist, Angela Cobbinah, who took part in the campaign that raised the money through dances and letter-writing appeals for the memorial stone. Angela was one of the young people

who carved the stone out of polished Cornish granite bearing the inscription 'Valiant fighter against racism and imperialism'. The stone was erected in 1984 in a ceremony attended by the Cuban and Chinese ambassadors. Only the Camden New Journal recorded the event – in a report written by Angela.

SEE OUR FACEBOOK PAGE HERE:
[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/GROUPS/656475478392971](https://www.facebook.com/groups/656475478392971) AND CONTACT US BY EMAIL AT CLAUDIAJONESMURAL@GMAIL.COM
WE ARE CURRENTLY COLLECTING MESSAGES OF SUPPORT FOR THE PROJECT, ESPECIALLY FROM LOCAL RESIDENTS, AS THIS IS A REQUIREMENT OF THE COUNCIL. HERE IS THE LINK TO THE GOOGLE DOCUMENT FOR THIS
[HTTPS://FORMS.GLE/LKKU2RDA6MF1BAA46](https://forms.gle/LKKU2RDA6MF1BAA46)

claudia jones

Born in Trinidad. Jailed in the US and then deported in the 1950s for being a Communist.

As racist violence erupted on the streets of Notting Hill, the monthly newspaper she founded (*West Indian Gazette*) became the voice of the unheard, selling more than 30,000 copies with its news and analysis that linked the plight of early black migrants to the international campaign for social justice.

As a visionary leader she brought Carnival to London, starting off with a dance at St Pancras Town Hall in 1959 to "wash away the bad taste of Notting Hill from our mouths", she said, adding, "a people's art is the genesis of their freedom".

Yet following her untimely death in 1964 at the age of 49 – her health ruined by her year in a US jail – Jones swiftly sank into obscurity. At her request she'd been buried next to Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery but the woman once described by Paul Robeson as "one of America's finest daughters" lay in an unmarked grave.

In 2008, Jones reached the political mainstream when she appeared on a UK postage stamp (see above). In the same year, a plaque to her was unveiled in Notting Hill as one of the "first ladies" of carnival with the support of Nubian Jak, an African Caribbean charity.

See Angela Cobbinah's full article here: <http://camdennewjournal.com/article/if-anyone-deserves-a-statue-it-is-claudia>

abortion: the fight continues

THE World Health Organisation (WHO) reports regularly on the number of abortions that are performed in each country, regardless if abortions are legal or illegal. They estimated that between 2015 and 2019 there were 73.3 million induced abortions world-wide, 45% of which were performed in unsafe or dangerous conditions.

We know from our own history in the UK that abortions were happening well before it became legal, but we also know that many women paid the price with their lives. Around seven million women are admitted to hospitals every year in developing countries as a result of unsafe abortions and up to 13% of maternal deaths are attributed to unsafe abortions. Despite this, access to free, legal and safe abortion is withheld from millions of women and it's not just an issue for developing countries.

Malta, an EU country has a total ban on abortions even in the case of rape or incest and even where abortion rights have been achieved, attempts to roll them back continues.

Emboldened by the election of Donald Trump, the American right-wing in Georgia, Kentucky Ohio and Mississippi banned abortion at six weeks and Alabama banned abortion outright. Although none of these laws are enacted because they directly contravene the Supreme Court case of *Roe v Wade*, it chillingly shows the fragility of the right to choose. Poland, which already has some of the strictest abortion laws in Europe is moving towards an almost total ban on abortions and in Honduras, where abortion has been banned since 1982, they have created a 'constitutional lock' to make it virtually impossible to legalise abortion. And now the DUP are trying to amend abortion rights legislation in Northern Ireland that was only brought in line with the rest of Britain two years ago.

But there has been some good news. In December last year, Argentina legalised abortion in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy. This was a huge success for campaigners and step forward for women's rights in a region that is powerfully influenced by the Catholic church. South Korea, Thailand and Jamaica are also reviewing their legislation.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made life even more challenging for women, and exacerbated inequality, particularly for women seeking an abortion. In Britain, face-to-face consultation and surgical procedures have been restricted, travel bans imposed and with money worries rising it's not surprising that in December 2020, the Pregnancy Advisory Service reported that 62% of women who had an abortion in the UK during the pandemic stated financial factors as one of the reasons for making this choice. The government's decision to allow women to take the two early medical abortion pills at home without a trip to a clinic came as a

result of pressure from healthcare professionals and campaigners, but this is only a temporary measure.

Abortion continues to be controversial because of deeply rooted social, political and economic attitudes towards women. However, the WHO has shown that restricting access to abortion does not reduce the number of abortions. So, what is it about? It's clearly a mechanism for control and power over women, even though it conflicts with the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Article 16 which makes it clear that women have the right to decide "freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights".

So, the campaign for free, legal and safe abortions will continue here and across the world because the right to choose is a fundamental cornerstone of the women's movement. Our bodies, our lives.

ANITA WRIGHT IS A MEMBER OF ABORTION RIGHTS AND THE NAW EC
WWW.ABORTIONRIGHTS.ORG.UK



outstanding women

AS the Women's International Democratic Federation moves past its 75th anniversary into the final quarter of its first century, the NAW renews its commitment to the international struggle for the rights of women and remembers some of the outstanding women who have led the organisation.

The WIDF was founded at a congress in Paris attended by women from organisations in 41 countries, and has dedicated itself to the struggle for women's economic, political and social rights, for the wellbeing and healthy development of children everywhere and for peace as the vital precondition for the achievement of equality.

The success of the WIDF has depended not only on the strength of its member organisations but the remarkable calibre of women who have been elected to leadership. The first president was **Eugenie Cotton**, leader of the Union des Femmes Francaises (UFF), also a member of the presidential committee of the World Peace Council, its highest governing body. **Monica Felton** from Britain became a WIDF vice-president and in May 1952 went to war-torn Korea on its behalf to campaign against germ warfare. **Dolores Ibarruri**, known as La Pasionaria during the civil war in Spain, became an inspirational honorary vice-president of the WIDF in 1963.

Two outstanding WIDF leaders have recently died. **Mayada Abbassi** passed away in December 2020. She was one of

the two WIDF vice-presidents for the Middle East. Throughout her life she fought for an end to the oppression of the Palestinian people and the occupation of their lands by the Israeli regime and for the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and a sovereign state. A skilled diplomat, she counted Palestinian ambassador to Peru among the many offices she held. As a WIDF vice-president, she promoted and defended women's rights everywhere, but she will best be remembered for bringing the voice of Palestinian women into the heart of the WIDF.

Our dear sister, **Elizabeta Tortosa**, who passed away in February this year has been described as an "audacious, insightful woman of immense tenderness" and an indefatigable campaigner. Elizabeta was a WIDF vice-president for the Americas and Caribbean and director of the Bolivarian Association of Women in Venezuela. She joined the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), founded by Hugo Chavez in 2007, from its inception and has been a tireless fighter for Venezuelan women and we will miss her immensely.

Mayada and Elizabeta are two examples of the recent giants on whom our movement depends. Future issues of *Sisters* will profile some of the amazing women who lead the WIDF. We rarely give them sufficient coverage and we know they will be inspirational.

LIZ PAYNE IS AN NAW EC MEMBER

National Assembly of Women weekend conference

**Saturday 12 & Sunday
13 June 2021 at
Hillscourt Education
Centre, Birmingham
(National Headquarters
of the NASUWT)**

**All our fingers are
crossed... keep an
eye on our website
sisters.org.uk**

sriyani arif



**ROZ CARTER, SECRETARY OF THE NAW'S
WEST LONDON BRANCH, REMEMBERS
FORMER EC MEMBER SRIYANI ARIF**

SRIYANI was a founder member of our Branch and a dedicated and active campaigner for women's rights and equality. Over many years, she reported back on a wide range of international topics such as China and Korea as well as the South Asia countries about which she was deeply knowledgeable.

Sriyani was committed to supporting many women's campaigns and issues of race and diversity. She led discussions on domestic violence, forced marriage and honour killings and was influential in our support for ASTI (Acid Survivors Trust International). We are most appreciative of the help Sriyani gave to our NAW branch as well as to the NAW Executive. She always assisted generously with the Branch fund-raising which supports a wide range of international campaigns.

Sriyani was totally committed to her family who have our sympathy at this time. We join the family in mourning her. She made a difference to many people and we will all miss her.

CELEBRATE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Online meeting. No advance registration needed

<https://tinyurl.com/5kywd5b8>

Saturday 6 March 2021, 6.30 to 9.00 pm

**International Rally & Cultural Evening
International speakers, music, poetry**

All women and men welcome

Organised by The Coordinating Committee of Communist Parties in Britain

8th MARCH INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

**THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN
SENDS GREETINGS TO
SISTERS WORLDWIDE**

**Fighting for
equality, peace
and progress**

what's on...

NAW Executive Committee meetings are open to *all* members. The next will be a "virtual" meeting on Saturday 17 April. If you would like to attend please contact the Secretary on naw@sisters.org.uk or at NAW, 72 Beaconsfield Road Coventry CV2 4AR

join the NAW now!

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

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

Name

Address

postcode

Organisation

phone

email

Send to: NAW, c/o C Simpson, Unite, 33-37 Moreland Street, London EC1V 8BB