

ALISON TREACHER
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JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P SUMMER 2021

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the case for a social care revolution

I have worked in 'social care', which is a relatively new term, all my adult life. I have worked in care homes, support accommodations, wellbeing centres and in the community offering support to people experiencing mental distress.

I did not randomly stumble into this line of work; from an early age, I was aware that there are deep-rooted problems in both our health and support services. Growing up, a close member of my family was committed to asylums on a regular basis – this left a profound effect on me, driving down dark country roads, being faced with imposing Victorian buildings and seeing the 'care' that my loved one, and experiencing the 'support' my family, was offered. Nothing apart from side effects from debilitating drugs, anxiety after fleeting visits and an authoritarian, impenetrable system, which overlooked any vague notion of choice or control.

I naively, but genuinely, believed that I could just do my best to work alongside people; offer the support, care and solidarity, that I could make a difference. However, our system is not fit for purpose. Constantly working within this contradiction is not easy, it grinds you down, and reforming our way out of it, even harder. This is why the debate around a national independent living service and a national care service and how the rights of disabled people intersects with service provision, our communities more widely, and rights and needs of workers are essential discussions to be having.

I work with some courageous people, trying our best in a broken system, a system that is underfunded, exploited by finance capital, outsourced and privatised – a system that leaves many in our communities alone, without their basic needs being met. We all agree, social care is broken, and a radical rethinking and reshaping is necessary.

I would be doing a disservice to my colleagues if I did not mention just how hard this pandemic has been for all of us. At the start of the pandemic many of us were forced to work without adequate PPE, some made their own out of polypockets and elastic from their leggings, others were issued substandard PPE, putting both ourselves and those we support at risk. The majority of care workers are working class women – doing a double shift, returning from work after long hours, to our families to care for our elderly parents, kids and neighbours.

We have had to work within opaque government guidelines, navigating the best way through, trying to find new ways of working, which will minimise risk for those we support, but baring a deep sense of responsibility to both shield those we support from the virus whilst ensuring their social needs are met.

Another issue, which care and support workers have had to face, is sick pay. In my organisation because we are unionised we took concerns around sick



pay to our employer and managed to extend the rights to full sick pay to those in probation and bank workers. We were the lucky ones. Many colleagues across the sector were left with either no provision, when having to self-isolate, or having to rely on SSP or the battle with their employer to access the bureaucratic Infection Control Fund. This left many care workers, on the frontline, worrying about how they were going to pay their bills. This continued when many were subjected to a post code lottery as to whether their local authority would pay the £500 self-isolation scheme.

During the pandemic I have been part of a national network of care and support workers, we came together during the pandemic to offer each other support, advice and information around how to organise in the workplace. Workers have experienced severe anxiety and loss, doing this in understaffed services, working long hours, on precarious contracts and poverty pay. Even though we have recognition in my workplace, most of my colleagues remain on minimum wage. Those who have worked in the sector for more than five years on average receive just 15p more than new entrants, there is little if any training provision, and if we are going to reimagine a new way of doing things I think investing in development and meaningful supervision is a necessary ask.

Another issue, which arose in the network, was the rights of personal assistants; many remain un-unionised, working for individual disabled employers. We need to avoid the 'strawman' argument that say workers and disabled people's rights must be in conflict with each other. I believe our relationship is intrinsically interdependent and that there are creative ways to structure services and employment contracts which benefits us

all. I fully support the right to independent living and the liberation of disabled people and those that require support for a shorter period.

Disabled people having control of their support is imperative especially when service provision is so bleak – I have listened to many disabled comrades speak about services which were offered – no choice or control and how dare they want to go to university or work! However, there are risks to workers in this approach to support provision and this becomes evident when you speak to personal assistants and concerned unionised care workers.

Let me be clear, by just replacing our 'boss' does nothing to improve our terms and conditions nor does it give us more agency as workers. Just replacing our boss does little to ensure workers have safe working environments; are offered sustained development or guaranteed clear policies and procedures which are there to protect us. By just replacing our boss, with little thought into the collectivisation of the workforce, in fact pushes personal assistants, care workers, support workers into a trap of sham or bogus self-employment bolstering the gig economy, precarious work and low pay.

We know that direct payments are not enough. We know that these payments often don't cover disabled people's basic needs, and we know there is no provision in these payments for workers supervision, sick pay or training.

There is a growing narrative that reaffirms the government drivel that personal assistants, care workers and support workers are unskilled, and anyone can do our jobs. Priti Patel certainly believes this – however there is a degree of emotional labour, which remains, invisible and unvalued.

Good support work is like a dance.

covid – women, work and childcare

Sensing how the other person will move, knowing no person will move the same. You need leadership skills to help people take risks, to trust you, to follow you into a busy shop knowing that there will be increased anxiety but you'll be there alongside them. Support work is different to many relationships in the health and social care, the longevity of the relationship is far longer to those relationships in nursing or counselling for example.

Support workers have to be very aware of being fair, recognising when we are wrong or have been unintentionally unhelpful and forging a way forward ensuring the boundaries of both parties have been respected. This is skilled work, and we must avoid the Tory trap of reducing our relationships to a list of tasks.

The government's failure is on an epic scale. Care and support no longer reflects users' needs or wishes. Social care has been marketised and privatised. Many small providers have folded and more and more care homes are increasingly managed by corporates and hedge funds with the aim of generating massive offshore profits.

We need to talk about how we avoid the next winter social care crisis.

There is no place for profit in social care and there is an urgent need to seek new proposals for the future which address the insourcing challenge as a first step towards a national social care system. There is an urgent need for a national debate to take place over the future shape and funding of the social care sector.

We need a social care system with public provision at its core with a new employment deal for workers to massively boost the pay and employment conditions and safeguard the health of the UK's 1.6 million social care workers.

I want to end by saying that 'care' is not something done to you. Well it shouldn't be, but it is intrinsically linked with how wealth is distributed, where we live, access to green space and public transport, the ability to access and the strength of our communities.

Co-production is both a philosophy and a mechanism to challenge power and safeguard. Real co-production is a term often misunderstood. Co-production is a radical, transformation of 'services'. Not a tweak to funding streams.

Co-production is where people who require services are seen as equals and experts in what is required to build better organisations, communities and societies. It is uncomfortable shift for many 'professionals' as it means sharing power with workers and those who use services – but this is what is required.

We need to come together in the spirit of true co-production in our unions, organisations and the wider labour movement. We must work together and refuse to let social relations created by capitalism divide us. Independent living is a right for all and we need systemic change.

BY ALISON TREACHER, MANCHESTER
SOCIAL ACTION BRANCH, UNITE THE UNION



WORKING parents have had a particularly tough time during this pandemic trying to juggle childcare and work commitments with home-schooling. The government's numerous U-turns and last-minute closures of schools and childcare providers could have been avoided if they had worked constructively with the education unions and voluntary sector from the beginning. But when has this government ever listened to those on the front line delivering the service?

Women, particularly working mothers, have been hit the hardest by the Covid crisis. A TUC survey published in January this year showed that women were more likely to be on furlough than men and to work in sectors hardest hit by Covid, like retail and hospitality.

Women also bore the brunt of childcare while schools and nurseries were closed. The survey found that one in six mothers – mainly those on the lowest pay – had to reduce their hours at work as a direct result of the closure of schools and child care providers. Some were forced out of the workplace altogether. Low paid workers were particularly affected as only one in ten low paid jobs could be done from home. Single parents were acutely affected – nine out of 10 of whom are women – as they are less likely to have someone to share caring responsibilities.

During the first national lockdown, working mothers reported being discriminated against because of difficulties with children, for example being singled out for unfair treatment, redundancy or being denied more hours at work. This was particularly the case for those women already at higher risk of discrimination, notably disabled mothers who were twice as likely to say they had been singled out for redundancy as a result of difficulties with childcare as non-disabled mothers.

On top of all this, unpaid work in the home has disproportionately fallen on women. A UN Women report published in November 2020 confirmed what we sus-

pected that there was clear evidence that, although both sexes have seen their unpaid workloads increase, women are bearing more of the burden than men.

So, as Covid restrictions begin to be eased and life slowly returns to some semblance of normality we need to demand that this government starts to address the structural inequality faced by women that has been made worse by the pandemic. The TUC Women's Committee in its recent statement criticised the government's plans for economic recovery which focuses investment in male-dominated sectors such as construction. It demands instead investing in a care-led recovery, creating 2.7 times as many jobs as the same investment in construction: 6.3 as many for women and 10 per cent more for men. Above all else we need Ministers to recognise the vital importance the childcare sector plays, economically and socially, and invest in it accordingly. As we begin to return to business as normal, local authorities and the government must not use the reduction in demand for childcare which occurred during the pandemic, due to many working parents being furloughed or made redundant, as a reason to assume that there is adequate provision. Expanding childcare provision will be vital in creating much needed long-term employment in the sector as well as short term employment in the construction industry. It will give more children access to high quality early learning, and most importantly give women the chance to seek employment in the knowledge that their children are safe and being well cared for.

ANITA WRIGHT IS AN NAW EC MEMBER
WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/BLOGS/WORKING-PARENTS-MUST-NOT-PAY-THE-PRICE-FOR-THE-GOVERNMENTS-LAST-MINUTE-APPROACH-ON-SCHOOLS-AND-CORONAVIRUS
WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/COMMITTEE-STATEMENTS-TUC-WOMENS-CONFERENCE

covid and union democracy...

ANITA HALPIN LOOKS AT THE DIFFERENT WAYS THAT UNIONS HAVE ADAPTED THEIR POLICY-MAKING DELEGATE CONFERENCES UNDER LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS

THE 2020 TUC Women's Conference was the last face-to-face trade union conference before the first lockdown. Delegates tried to act normally though everyone was a bit edgy, but the sisters got on with the business and got the job done.

This year's conference was very different; all online and no delegates. All the motions were taken in closed sessions attended by members of the Women's Committee and nominees from any union not represented on the committee and voting was weighted by individual union membership. There was little debate, motions being moved formally unless there was opposition.

Last year's TUC was organised in a similar way as were the other equality conferences and also all this year's equality conferences. The TUC took a very early decision that this year's TUC will follow the same model. On the other hand the Labour Party is intending to hold a real live conference in the autumn.

In 2020 all unions cancelled their national policy conferences, except for my own union the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) which postponed its delegate meeting. Most unions had some sort of online conference last year with themed debates rather than discussion and voting on submitted motions and used the opportunity to offer extra interactive events open to all members.

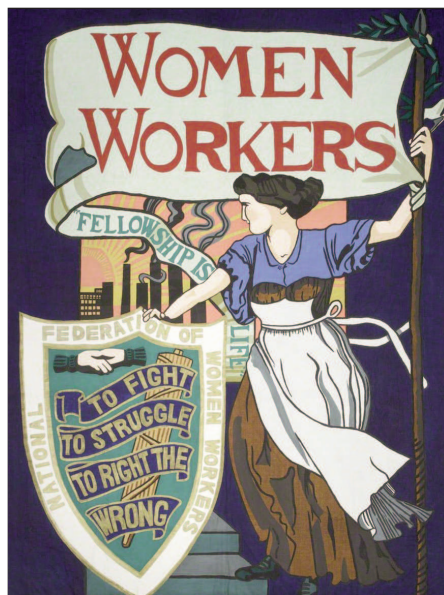
The National Education Union (NEU) also held a special on-line conference in October 2020 to consider rule-change motions that had been submitted for its Easter conference. It also developed an electronic voting programme which some unions have developed for their own conferences. The Communication Workers Union held a rule-change conference earlier this year.

They are to be congratulated. Maintaining robust union democracy is the duty of the union's leadership at all times.

Trade union membership brings with it both rights and responsibilities. Firstly, the democratic right to a voice in framing policy and holding the leadership to account, and second, the democratic responsibility to observe the union's rules and the right to change them.

So far this year, unions have come up with a variety of arrangements for their annual or biennial conferences. So far all have been online but TSSA and Unite have postponed their conferences until later this year in anticipation of being able to hold a 'real live' conference.

The education unions' online conferences were attended by elected delegates and debated and voted (electronically) on motions within normal conference procedures.



One experience of a shorter on-line conference is that there was more reliance on mega-composite motions facing both ways. One large union is holding a virtual special delegate conference and invited motions around three themes agreed by the executive.

The conference I have most knowledge of was the NUJ delegate meeting last month. The 2020 Final Agenda was picked up and all motions – other than those overtaken by events or already actioned by the NEC – were debated in the usual way under our standing orders. In view of the pandemic the NEC with the agreement of Standing Orders Committee had extended the deadline for amendments and late notice (emergency) motions. And a proposal to exceptionally allow rule-change motions and amendments was the first motion to be agreed by delegates.

The delegates were those properly elected for last year's Delegate Meeting. We used an electronic voting programme, adapted from the NEU model and developed to meet our conference procedures. Electronic voting was also used for elections. Delegates were able to 'point of order' via the voting platform and delegates used the Q&A button on the conference screen to put in to speak or raise procedural motions.

Earlier this year I wrote a piece for the *Morning Star* asking whether Covid restrictions posed a threat to union democracy. My experience of the NUJ shows that virtual meetings can be fully democratic but this requires both a committed leadership and an efficient back-stage team of 'techies'.

Unfortunately, restrictions can allow union executives to bypass areas of their standing orders and rules and it's up to lay activists to ensure they don't take such relaxed procedure forward to real conferences.

Undoubtedly, virtual arenas offer exciting opportunities to attract many more

attendees than could ever be crammed into an average meeting room.

Unions which have stood up for their members during lockdown have all been making recruits. Recruitment is always more likely when workers are in crisis, but the crucial thing has always been how to retain them and grow the union.

It is difficult enough for new members to get involved and interested in branch life in real meetings. Virtual meetings may be much more interesting, especially when people are isolated and lonely, but won't necessarily develop involvement in the union.

New platforms open up new possibilities but the lack of computer expertise or access should not become a hidden disadvantage in the 21st century.

Experiences so far in this conference year would seem to suggest that the best model would be a normal real conference (with electronic voting) complemented by a range of union- and industry-specific online workshops and seminars and fringe meetings available online and open to all members and not only delegates.

ANITA HALPIN IS A FORMER MEMBER OF THE TUC GENERAL COUNCIL AND CHAIR OF ITS WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

more union democracy...

GMB announced a new general secretary (3 June). Gary Smith won, defeating two women candidates on a 10.6% turnout.

Unison elected a new general secretary last November – Christina McAnea won over three men on a 9.8% turnout.

Unite is in the process of an election for general secretary – the four candidates are one woman and three men. Unite elected Len McCluskey in 2017 on a 12.2% turnout.

These are the three largest unions...

A random selection of three middle sized unions for which turnouts are readily available shows: Equity had a turnout of 16% in 2020, PCS 18.6% in 2019, and UCU 20.5% in 2019.

never forget the children!



EVEN before the pandemic, although there had been significant improvement in the health, safety, and wellbeing of children worldwide in the three decades since 1990, the statistics presented a gravely concerning picture. Some countries were seeing a gradual improvement replaced by decline across a spectrum of measures. For those living in states run by reactionary, corrupt and often dictatorial regimes and subjected to the wanton resource-plundering of multinationals, including many companies listed on the London Stock Exchange, the outlook for the world's youngest citizens in 2019 was increasingly grim.

According to UNICEF, one in 27 children (5.2 million) the majority (80%) in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia, did not survive to see their fifth birthday. In sub-Saharan Africa, the death rate for the under-fives was one in 13, compared with Australia's one in 264. That year a child died every five seconds, mostly from preventable causes such as infections, pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malnutrition – directly caused by insanitary conditions, lack of access to healthcare, medicines and immunisation programmes and poverty. If the present trend continued, said UNICEF, there would be 48 million under-five deaths by 2130. Many older children died in preventable accidents, including at work as child labourers. Children of all age groups died in and in flight from war zones.

Covid-19 only worsened the situation. According to the UN "The pandemic has triggered an unprecedented global health, humanitarian, socio-economic and human rights crisis, exacerbating the vulnerabilities of affected children."

Millions more children have been thrown into poverty as their parents, and especially their mothers, have lost their jobs and livelihoods. According to the World Population Review 2021, unem-

ployment rates are now over 40% in Kenya, Djibouti, Haiti, Senegal, Syria and Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso 77% are unemployed. The statistics do not include those who still pick up a few hours work but have lost most of the income on which they depended. Neither do they include many migrants without papers and large sections of the marginalised and unregistered poor.

Millions of children worldwide have had their schools closed, losing not only their education but often a safety and security network. Most of the world's children have had critical interruptions to their schooling and hence to their progress and all-round development. In 2020, one and a half million schools closed in India alone, affecting 247 million children. Homes have not been safe for many in both the developing and developed world and the lid is yet to be fully lifted on the abuse to which women and children have been exposed.

When we think of Covid-19, we may not picture children as primary victims. But overstretched and often collapsing hospitals and health services have been unable to provide for the basic welfare needs children – both preventative measures such as continuing immunisation programmes and care of those who fall sick. Polio, cholera, and Ebola all had significant outbreaks in 2020. Covid simply overwhelmed the under-resourced and creaking systems. Already dire situations have been exacerbated by sanctions regimes imposed by imperialist countries, blocking food and medical supplies to pandemic-stricken countries. The primary victims have been, as always, the poor and vulnerable, including large numbers of children.

Millions have been orphaned by the pandemic. Lack of vaccine, especially in the world's poorer and less developed countries, has led to the unnecessary

deaths of parents, grandparents, and other family care providers. At the same time, pharmaceutical giants have engaged in price and supply wars in pursuit of mega-profits. Globally, at the time of writing, the vaccination rate is 150 doses per 1,000 people. In sub-Saharan Africa it is just eight per 1,000. The UN says that Africa has received only 2% of the world's vaccine. It is home to almost 17% of the world's population.

Before and during COVID, major wars and conflicts, frequently fuelled by the military-industrial complexes and the governments of the US and its allies including Britain, have brought death, injury, homelessness, and destitution to thousands of children – in Syria, Yemen, Azerbaijan and Armenia and, recently, in Gaza. Women and children form the majority of refugees and internally displaced people as a result of conflict. With lives already shattered, they frequently lack shelter, food and clean water and cannot access the services they desperately need. Those in flight have fewer options; 99 countries now have closed borders. Many children and adolescents are vulnerable to attack, including sexual assault and rape in their refugee camps and temporary accommodation.

Jihadist insurrection continues to wreak havoc with children's lives in north-east Nigeria, Chad Cameroon, and Niger. In Mozambique 191,000 children are internally displaced. Children are increasingly and shockingly the intended targets of Islamist attack, especially schoolgirls as seen recently in Nigeria and Afghanistan.

Child marriage continues unabated, and we will surely see this increase as a result of the deprivations of Covid. In Niger more than three quarters of girls are married before their 18th birthday. In Iran, little ones as young as nine can be forced to marry. Child mortality figures worldwide show a significant number of deaths of girls under 15 years old resulting from pregnancy and birth related complications. Many child-mothers suffer horrific injuries without access to professional healthcare.

In the time it has taken you to read this article, some 360 children under five have died. In 13 countries the under-five mortality rate today is between 60 and 106 per 1,000 live births. The National Assembly of Women, together with the Women's International Democratic Federation, has always had the welfare and happiness of children as a primary aim. Our campaigning, especially against our government's foreign policy of economic plunder, military intervention and warfare can make a difference to millions. We, together with our sisters internationally, must ensure that the preventable horrors set out here are eradicated from the future. Never forget the children!

**BY LIZ PAYNE – A MEMBER OF THE
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN**

all mothers are working mothers

THIS is the farm road. It leads from the mountain and its wild, bare moorland, back to the village of Bedlinog that sits hacked into the slopes of the Taf Bargoed valley. After running on the open windy terrain of Cefn Gelligaer, the farm road feels like the home straight. The landscape is tamer here, sheep are brought to its lower slopes during lambing season; in the hedgerows nettles grow and cowslips, with bluebells in the shaded spots. Families have long walked here; children ride alongside their parents or grandparents on bikes and scooters.

I walk here with my own children now, pushing my little boy in his pushchair mid morning, lulling him to sleep while my little girl runs beside me. We're running! she exclaims full of amazement. We are! I answer; it's true. The breeze dances, playing in our hair and my little boy falls asleep to the sound of our voices and the warm song of the world around him.

A path leads to the woods below and to the spot where Pit Number 2 stood, in the days when the village was one big coal mine. We stop here, it is our cafe. Oh thank you for coming to see me! my little girl says to me, in Welsh. What would you like today, chips and beans? She serves me chips of grass, beans of stones or woodland sorrel in the Spring. It is around this time that my little boy wakes and we wend our way home, the three of us and the buggy. In the spring-time we stop to watch the lambs or newborn calves teetering on spindly legs. They're feeding! My children call out in wonder – still young enough to remember the pleasure it brings.

When I run here on my own, I hear their voices. I see their chubby little hands fumbling for moss, or stones or a cwch. Their laughter mixes with the sound of the stream and I am tricked for a second, turning my head to look, knowing they are not there really, yet catching myself looking still. Just here the road rises, the gradient a little steeper, and I'm surprised at how easy it is to run it without the struggle and negotiation of carrying a little boy who's just woken up, cajoling his by-now-sleepy (and sometimes crying) sister, while pushing the buggy and occasionally a scooter too. But this daily ritual of walking with and carrying my children is something I hold onto tightly, knowing it will inevitably end.

This period of having children has felt like one long pause (of sorts). A moment of stepping out of life as I knew it and seeing the world from a completely different angle. I watch it whirr by with all its drama as I slow down: allowing my pockets to be filled with twigs and feathers, turning over rocks, watching spiders and woodlice going about their day as we slowly, slowly, go about ours.

With the birth of my children came many beautiful presents; but one gift stood out from all those others. It arrived a few months later and it made me stand

up a little straighter, not feel so vulnerable. It was sent by a friend from Australia and it was a well-read, slightly battered copy of an out-of-print booklet from 1972. The pamphlet, by Mariarosa Dalla Costa from Italy and Selma James from the USA, is called *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. It uses a feminist reading of Marx to analyse the situation of mothers staying home to care for their children.

What I found astonishing was that the circumstances of a mother who stays at home to look after her children has hardly changed in over 40 years and, of course, much longer. I was also shocked at myself: I had not taken into account, or thought seriously about, the history of the role I was stepping into. I was excited too that this pamphlet, originally written in

Italian, had been translated into many languages and had started an international movement demanding rights for housewives. In Padua the Wages for Housework Campaign was launched by Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, but by the end of the 1970s groups belonging to the movement had sprung up in the USA, Britain and many other countries around Europe.

The pamphlet insists that reproductive labour is fundamental to waged work: it generates the workers of the future; it cares for the children of those in waged work as well as taking care of the waged-labourers themselves – all integral aspects of a capitalist society. Yet it is not considered productive enough to deserve a wage. In fact, a mother caring full-time



for her children is not considered to be working at all. We depend on the wages of a partner (if there is one) and if that wage is too small we are dependent upon supplementary government benefits that fluctuate in relation to our partner's income. This does not only affect the 'traditional' working class. Many workers in our society do not receive a fair living wage – even at the cultural and national institutions that we are so proud of here in Wales.

A single full-time mother on benefits is not considered to be working either, and on top of having to fulfil this role alone, the stigma of financial dependence is more obvious. The fact that these benefits are decidedly not a wage but are considered 'handouts' further disrespects the work that these women accomplish under extremely difficult circumstances.

Returning to waged work would give us autonomy, but it would not allow us to care for our children. And there lies the crux of the issue. Where is the freedom of choice? At six months, nine months or one year our babies are utterly dependent on us but not yet eligible for government-funded childcare, or school nursery places. So what are we to do? It is preposterous that we are expected to pay for childcare (and not only because many of us can't afford it).

The phenomenon of the 'yummy mummy' of affluent communities lives on via Instagram and wellness blogs, and we are used to hearing about the 'juggling act' facing middle-class working mothers (but we are all working mothers!). What we don't tend to hear so much about, is the situation of the stay-at-home mother who has no other choice: her economic situation allows her none, as childcare is too expensive to make having a job viable. Nor do we hear so much about those who choose this role despite knowing it will consign her to economic struggle and dependency. This situation is complicated by the fact that watching your children grow, helping them to negotiate the world is also a privilege. It is special, fleeting and poignant. And this is another reason why it's inconceivable to some that what we do is work.

We are not doing anything remotely revolutionary: we are not chief executives of successful companies, we are not scientists or engineers, we are not monetising our lifestyle projects from our bespoke kitchens. We are just at home, dressed in splodges of food and snot and felt tip pen... We are not really doing our part for the feminist cause at all: we are not being dazzling or interesting, not pushing any boundaries.

Finding this pamphlet showed me the possibilities of groups of women uniting to demand better working conditions through wages and, consequently, the recognition that what we do as mothers is labour: moreover it is productive labour and it is essential. By confronting the irra-

tionality of the fact that a stay-at-home mother (for want of a better term) does not get paid for her labour, the infrastructure of the whole system underpinning this begins to fall apart – as does neoliberal feminism. Because regardless of how many CEOs or directors are women, as long as this system of organising our society is upheld, we will always need a body of workers to look after our children until they are old enough to be sent to school. This body of workers consists of parents, family members and nursery staff – the overwhelming majority of whom are women.

This model of feminism – where we try to enter the workforce demanding the same positions, opportunities and wages as men – is still a capitalist take on what it means to be a woman. Capitalism offers only the illusion of choice by ignoring – and in turn forcing us to ignore – our own biology. If we have had children, not only are we contributing to capital via our reproductive labour but we also find ourselves in the difficult situation of having no real community in which to raise our children in any manageable way. Capitalism has disbanded the community – which is absolutely necessary to women if we are to recover from childbirth properly and raise children happily – by forcing everybody that it possibly can into waged labour, leaving hardly anyone around to help us.

Although the feminist struggle has allowed women to go out to work it has not yet freed us as mothers. The movement granted us access to those roles traditionally handed out to men and gained further ground recently with the campaign for freedom of information relating to pay, with demands for equal wages. Although necessary, this is still an example of women trying to be equal in a society that is organised around the high-earning capitalist class and the male worker, rather than an alternative version of society, organised considering the needs of women.

Silvia Federici (of the Wages for Housework campaign), in her 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch*, traces the low wages of women in the workplace back to the transition to capitalism. Across Europe, starting in the late 15th century, women were expelled from workshops by craftsmen (assisted by the urban authorities), and also banned from other waged work before being banished to the home where they were not paid for their labour (now named 'housekeeping'). This normalised the practice of not paying women a wage at all or simply paying them a much lower rate than men.

From this perspective it seems illogical that we demand equal wages for women in the workplace without also demanding an actual wage for mothers – or for any parent – whose work it is to look after their children full time. Neither does it help if middle to high earning parents are

still willing to pay nursery staff or their cleaner (all usually female) the minimum wage. Denying women a wage for their reproductive labour, or paying them as little as possible for their care work, is a means of repressing the female population and, consequently, the working classes in general.

Along with considerably longer maternity and paternity leave, paying parents a decent wage for raising their children would be a step towards allowing women a real choice when it came to working or being at home with their children. If a mother's reproductive labour was taken seriously and paid seriously, the repercussions would allow for all care work to be taken seriously: it would set a precedent for nursery staff to earn better wages along with cleaners and those working in care homes or helping the vulnerable members of our communities. In short, many of the working poor and the unwaged poor would be brought out of poverty if their labour was fully acknowledged and if their wage reflected the essential nature of what they do.

Where capitalism succeeded in making women's work invisible, socialism – despite its unions, its political education and its workmen's halls – failed to make our labour visible again. The very term 'workmen's halls' – part of my upbringing, having been brought up in the Valleys – irritates me now. How could men ever have imagined the struggle was theirs alone? One of the ways in which capitalism divided the proletariat was through its war on women, but by not recognising the reproductive labour of women as equal to all other work, socialism is failing the working classes. Women have, fundamentally, been left out of the struggle for equality, so that even as basic a concept as demanding a wage for a mother's labour seems radical.

Until our biology, our reproductive capacity, or as Simone de Beauvoir said – our 'enslavement to the mysteries of life' – is respected, this complete disregard for our very human essence will be our problem still.

BY CATRIN ASHTON

THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN PLANET: THE WELSH INTERNATIONALIST MAGAZINE, ISSUE 231 IN 2018.
WWW.PLANETMAGAZINE.ORG.UK

National Assembly of Women weekend conference

the date has moved yet again due to the pandemic, but all fingers are crossed for...

Saturday 16 & Sunday 17 October 2021 at Hillscourt Education Centre, Birmingham (National Headquarters of the NASUWT)

Information will be emailed to members and affiliates, but keep an eye on the website also at www.sisters.org.uk

Women's Budget Group Webinars

Impact of the pandemic on working-class women

Friday 18 June 10am to 12.30
www.eventbrite.co.uk/covid-19-and-working-lives-in-the-uk-inequalities-of-gender-and-class-tickets-155607828203

Access to public transport is unequal and prioritises men

Thursday 24 June 1pm to 2pm
www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/transforming-transport-travelling-towards-an-inclusive-green-system-tickets-155583302847

Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture 2021 on Saturday 7 August at Wortley Hall, Sheffield
Professor Mary Davis on Sylvia Pankhurst: women, race and class – then and now

Further details will be posted on
<http://sylviapankhurst.gn.apc.org/>

You will be able to attend in person or online...

People's Assembly Against Austerity
National demonstration to DEMAND A NEW NORMAL

Saturday 26 June assemble 12 noon at Portland Place, London, march to Parliament Square

what's on...

NAW Executive Committee meetings are open to *all* members. The next will be a "virtual" meeting on Saturday 10 July. 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