Dear Sisters

Firstly, can I thank our Federation of the Women of Greece (OGE) sisters for organising this teleconference. It is good to be here with everyone and to see, dear companions, that you are safe and well.

I bring you greetings of solidarity and peace from the Executive of the National Assembly of Women (NAW) and its president, Rose Keeping. Rose is sadly unable to be with us today as she is recovering from major surgery. She is disappointed not to be able to meet you for the first time since she took office and sends her good wishes for a successful meeting. She hopes very much to be with us the next time we come together.

This year, the combined effects of the deep global economic crisis looming in late 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to have a particularly devastating effect on women in every country. In Britain, women’s lives, livelihoods, and status, as well as our collective struggle for rights, equality and justice have been and continue to be very seriously undermined. This is why the work of the NAW as custodian of the widely endorsed and recently updated Charter for Women, which sets out our demands for women in society, at work and in the labour movement, is so important.

The NAW is clear that the national care system, and public services that women in particular use, were broken by years of austerity before COVID but that structural inequality has been exposed and made so much worse by the pandemic.

Only a few days ago most COVID restrictions were lifted here but infections are soaring, and so many people are either ill (more than 40,000 a day are becoming infected) or required to isolate because they have been in contact with a person who has the virus, that vital services and supplies of food and other necessities are being compromised. The mass opening-up, enforced by a ruthless, reckless, and incompetent Conservative government is, of course, shamelessly in the interest of big business – profits before people all the way! This is not new but has become increasingly blatant as scientists, including progressive advisors to the government giving cautionary and people-centred advice, have been ignored. One of our sisters, an eminent scientist, was recently politically attacked on national television and subsequently savaged through social media.

There is much fear and not without reason. The jobs market for women is “fragile” at best. Women are losing their jobs at a higher rate than in previous economic crises and are at much, much greater risk of redundancy. Even where jobs are not lost, women have disproportionately been furloughed and suffered pay cuts; huge numbers are likely to be out of work altogether when furlough ends in September. They are also concentrated in low paid vulnerable sectors worst hit by the virus, such as care services, retail, and hospitality. Childcare provision has shrunk leaving working women in the lurch and many women are giving up work to look after children, thus losing their independence. Women in work and out of work face a huge burden of care in their families as public services continue to shrink. Tensions in families are huge and women have been exposed to a tsunami of domestic violence, the full force and impact of which is yet to be calculated and comprehended. Low wages, insecure work, and failure of the benefits system have disproportionately affected women and their families. 49% of children of single parents live in poverty and 9 out of 10 single parents are women. These problems are not inevitable, but the government and the monopolies they represent are happy to spend £205bn on Trident (nuclear arms) and pay £180m for every F35B warplane and £32,000 for every hour that each one flies!

The NAW continues to play a vital role in the struggle for equality, peace and ultimately for socialism. Our electronically and paper distributed magazine, ‘Sisters’, continues to play an important role in raising vital issues on the left and in particular in the labour movement. The quest for equal pay and conditions 50 years after the Equal Pay Act, women and the wholly inadequate benefits system, the struggle for maternity rights and care, affordable quality childcare, combatting violence and abuse, women and the impacts of climate change (ahead of COP26 in Glasgow in November), women and the anti-war, anti-imperialist and peace movement are just some issues covered in our recent and forthcoming editions.

Our latest affiliation is to the progressive anti-colonial, anti-imperialist organisation, Liberation, and we will ensure that the struggle of women is kept centre-stage in this very influential campaign in Britain.

We continue to campaign as an organisation and with others against nuclear arms, weapons of mass destruction and the war-mongering of our government, especially in its role of premier ally of the US. Our links of solidarity and sisterhood, via the WIDF, with women fighting against imperialism and all its manifestations and for peace across the world are crucial to our struggle. We particularly oppose our government’s part in the waging of cold war, including against the people of Cuba historically and at the present time.

The NAW has continued throughout the pandemic to meet via tele-conference, and we are to hold our first physical event in Birmingham in mid-October. Our theme will be ‘Women and Work’ and we will look not only to consider the campaign for preserving women’s very threatened jobs post-COVID but also the impact of automation and robotics on women’s work and securing women’s jobs in a new and super-exploitative world of work. Our speakers include women with high profiles in the trade union movement, parliament, and national campaigns.

During the pandemic, our membership – both individual and trade union affiliates – has stayed steady. We are now looking to significantly extend our base in the labour movement and win the affiliation of more unions and trades councils. We are particularly keen to reach union organisations representing women in the public sector, where women, and especially low-paid women, form the majority of unionised workers.

Next year, in 2022, we will mark our 70th anniversary and have started to plan how to mark this milestone.

Dear Sisters – please pass the NAW’s greetings also to all WIDF organisations and their members struggling in Europe – in the heart of imperialism – for equality, peace, and socialism. We look forward to participating with you in the WIDF’s 17th Congress next year.

Report given by NAW EC member Liz Payne to WIDF Europe meeting 23 July 2021