

THEMBI NOBADULA  
WITH BARBARA  
SWITZER SEE PAGE 7



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# the benefit system is broken

**T**HE benefit system in Britain is broken. Anti-poverty charities, food bank and disability organisations know this all too well as they desperately try to support the growing number of people and families struggling to survive. Although this has been made much worse during the pandemic, it's a problem that goes back decades. Years of Tory austerity policies resulted in an increase in precarious employment, rising rents and food prices, years of stagnating wages and erosion of local services. In 2009 there were 30 Trussell Trust food banks operating in Britain; by 2019 there were 2,100. More food banks than branches of McDonald's.

Changes to the benefit system have been piecemeal, complicated and chaotic as with the merging of six benefits into one under Universal Credit, the move from universality to means-testing, and the introduction of the two-child limit for government support. This has made it harder for claimants to work out eligibility and to make their claim. Constant tinkering with the system has also made it more difficult to compare year on year spending by the government and to identify the number of claimants in each category. Although in 2018 Frank Field MP obtained information that exposed how the government planned by 2021 to cut benefit spending by £37 billion with the biggest cuts in disability benefits and in-work support. Although the arrival of Covid-19 may well have scuppered that timetable the withdrawal of the Universal Credit £20 uplift from 1 September, which helped so many during the pandemic, is a stark reminder of the brutal mean-mindedness of a Tory government.

In February 2021, the Women and Equalities Parliamentary Committee published a report on the gendered economic impact of the pandemic. It recognised that even before the pandemic, women were more likely than men to claim benefits at some point in their lives and that there was a 90% increase in the number of people on Universal Credit. However, it was critical of the government's own Equality Impact Assessment, judging it to be "not fit for purpose" because there was no mention of childcare or recognition that women make up the majority of single parent households and carry out most of the childcare in two parent families. The report notes that "There was no mention of childcare in either the Summer Economic Statement or Winter Economy Plan. This was astonishing given the vital importance of childcare provision for women's participation in paid work, and the precarious position of the childcare sector".

The Covid pandemic and economic crisis it caused has highlighted the disproportionate impact on women, particularly the amount of unpaid work we undertake. Before the pandemic, women were spending on average three times as many hours on unpaid domestic and car-

ing work as men – and this contribution was grossly undervalued. In 2018, the International Labour Organisation reported that "the 16 billion hours spent on unpaid caring every day would represent nearly a tenth of the world's entire economic output it was paid at a fair rate". The UN Women report in November 2020 concluded that the "average woman now spends nearly the equivalent of a full-time job doing unpaid childcare – a full working day a week more than the average man".

As well as caring for children, women are also bearing the brunt of the social care crisis. Age UK estimate that there are over 1.25million "sandwich carers" in the UK – people caring for an older relative as well as having childcare responsibilities – 850,743 (68%) are women and is demanding increased support for unpaid carers.

## is a universal basic income the answer?

It is against this backdrop that a debate started some time ago about the introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) which is an unconditional and regular payment regardless of income, wealth or work. Supporters of UBI see it as creating a safety net below which nobody would fall, opponents regard it as unaffordable and not the answer to poverty. In 2017 the TUC commissioned a report to examine UBI:

"The debate on Universal Basic Income has become unhelpfully polarised between noisy and passionate advocates 'for' and 'against' the policy. This paper shows that the reality is much more messy. When thinking about risks arising from the future world of work, a UBI has some advantages over the current social security and tax system, but also a range of drawbacks. And in many cases, other more practical tax and benefit reforms offer different or better solutions."

Whilst not completely rejecting some aspects the TUC report concluded that:

"In practice the response to these challenges will not come from a single policy, whether it is UBI or anything else. The answers will lie in multi-layered reforms to our tax and social security system with tiers of financial support working in combination: universal as well as means-tested; unconditional as well as conditional; non-contributory as well as contributory. Along the way, these reforms should embrace elements of the UBI idea – and modest, partial basic incomes may have their place in the eventual toolkit. But a fully-fledged UBI is not the silver bullet for our future labour market."

So, the announcement in June by Wales First Minister, Mark Drakeford that the Welsh Labour government would pilot UBI with a focus on care leavers came as a surprise, not just because social security is not devolved to Wales but because the annual cost could be as much as £40

to £50 million. Details are still being discussed but the think tank Autonomy has set out a plan for the pilot involving 5,000 residents over a two-year period. Under the plan payments would be in line with minimum income standards according to the Joseph Rowntree Trust as follows:

- Children aged 0-17 years would receive £120.48 per week paid to the guardian
- Adults aged 18-64 years would receive £213.59 per week
- Adults aged 65+ would receive £195.90 per week

All eyes will be on the outcome of this pilot, not least those of the trade unions and anti-poverty campaigners. For the women's movement the test will be if this addresses the systemic inequality in the current benefit system and bring greater equality to the millions of women living in poverty in Britain.

ANITA WRIGHT IS A MEMBER OF THE NAW EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

[WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/RESEARCH-ANALYSIS/REPORTS/UNIVERSAL-BASIC-INCOME-AND-FUTURE-WORK](http://WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/RESEARCH-ANALYSIS/REPORTS/UNIVERSAL-BASIC-INCOME-AND-FUTURE-WORK)

WHAT MIGHT A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME MEAN FOR WALES? (SENEDD.WALES)

PILOTING A BASIC INCOME IN WALES – AUTONOMY

universal  
credit  
replaces:

Child Tax Credit  
Working Tax Credit  
Housing Benefit  
Income Support  
Income based Job-Seekers  
Allowance  
Income related Employment  
and Support Allowance

# we need a right to food

**A NEW REPORT SHOWS THAT FOOD WORKERS INCREASINGLY CANNOT AFFORD TO FEED THEMSELVES – WE NEED TO TAKE THE FIGHT AGAINST IN-WORK POVERTY SERIOUSLY, WRITES BAKERS, FOOD AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION GENERAL SECRETARY SARAH WOOLLEY**

**I**N April the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU) published a report that calls for the right to food for every citizen, every worker, every child across Britain.

In this report we wanted to give voice to our members. We wanted to hear from them their experiences and whether food workers were themselves feeling "food insecure" and suffering from food poverty.

The findings are shocking. Many of our members in the food industry – the forgotten key workers, the very people who kept us all fed during the pandemic – are struggling to feed themselves and their families. And the reason is simple: endemic low pay.

On the back of our report, Ian Lavery, Labour MP for Wansbeck, asked Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs George Eustice whether he thought in the arguably the sixth-richest country in the world that it was right that food workers were themselves struggling to eat.

The answer told us all we need to know about Tory callousness and how little they care about working people.

Empty and vacuous, he had no empathy or understanding about the reality on the ground for our members going out every single day to work during the pandemic to keep us fed, putting themselves in harm's way when doing so and literally going hungry.

It showed clearly the need for our movement to unite and get back to some basics. We need to redouble our efforts and work together to tackle low-pay Britain – we need to campaign to ensure people are not going hungry.

As a union, we will work with everyone, right across our movement, to make this happen. We will fight in every single individual workplace to drive up pay, terms and conditions for our members.

But make no mistake – we will also fight in the political arena and campaign for a statutory minimum wage of at least £15 an hour.

This will ensure workers earn enough to give them dignity – the means to afford food and other essentials with some left over to enjoy precious time with friends and family. And we will fight for the right to food to be legislated.

The reality is that our economy has been deliberately structured in such a way that the conditions are ripe for hunger and food poverty. While the rich get richer, in-work poverty has been normalised as wages decline.

Welfare has been dismantled and what should be a system of social insurance



has been replaced with a partial, cruel and punitive scheme that rewinds the clock to a bygone era based on the concept of the "deserving and undeserving poor".

Imagine sanctioning the poorest and leaving them without money to eat if they fail to turn up for an appointment on time.

It's estimated that 14.5 million of our fellow citizens are in poverty when housing costs are factored in.

The environment and rural affairs committee at Westminster earlier this month reported how in the previous six months 7.6 million people, including 1.7 million children, had experienced food poverty.

How is this right and why are we allowing this to be normalised in 21st century Britain?

These numbers are human beings – from our own members we hear from stories that expose the mental toll of working through the pandemic for low pay.

One Scottish food production worker told us: "I should have been shielding but my work refused to furlough me. I had no choice but to work because I couldn't afford to be on statutory sick pay."

Another food worker in Northern Ireland explained: "I get my basic wage, £8.72, and no bonus from my employer and was lucky to get a clap for key workers. There was very poor PPE for me and work colleagues."

It took six staff members catching Covid-19 before anything was done.

A worker in England caught the mood of much of the responses succinctly: "The pay is terrible everywhere in these roles to be honest. It's not enough to cover bills and food – it's just not good enough."

Our survey found that 20 per cent of respondents had needed food from friends or family to provide meals, while over seven per cent of the food workers were having to use foodbanks.

Perhaps the most shocking finding was that almost one in five of the food workers in our survey told us that they had experienced running out of food because of a lack of money.

Moreover, double that figure told us

that they had been worried about running out of food – which shows how the slightest change in the cost of living or number of hours worked could force so many more people into hunger.

Hearing these stories from our members has shown just how fractured our economy is.

We must never accept or normalise hunger, low pay and poverty. It is in direct contravention to our values. Legislating for a right to food should be at the heart of our movement going forward and getting behind the campaign led by Ian Byrne MP should be a priority.

A right to food will mean every single policy requires a food impact assessment. If done properly, this would mean a higher minimum wage and a welfare system that increases provision, ends the five-week wait for universal credit and puts the cruel sanctions regime into the dustbin of history where it belongs.

It means universal free school meals and it means a government-backed, community-focused approach to accessing food – not one reliant on charity.

When it comes down to it, people in our country are starving. We cannot accept the solution is to hope philanthropy fills the bellies of people who otherwise face going to bed hungry.

Let's end hunger, end child poverty, in-work poverty and endemic low pay together. This is a battle that does take us back to basics – but sadly it must now be central in all the work that we do.

**THIS ARTICLE WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN APRIL IN THE MORNING STAR**



# women at cop26

## trades unions combine for climate justice



I have attended two of the UN international Conferences of the Parties, and, as an active trade unionist with an environmental role, I want this one to be massively different!

In Paris in 2015, we joined the noise and creativity OUTSIDE on the streets and made cardboard placards in a huge warehouse full of energetic young people. In Marrakech 2016 two young Muslim women and I travelled by train (and boat) to help run an NGO stall sharing ideas about hydrogen being a safe gas to burn instead of our current atmosphere damaging methane and carbon dioxide. In the huge tent of the Blue Zone I was confronted by competitive marketing – glitzy and convincing, very competitive. But I did witness women being taken seriously and the emergence of a gendered consciousness of climate injustice, where the legacy of colonialism and resource exploitation carries on!

This year a tiny NGO, Planet Hydrogen, where I am a Trustee, has been offered space, but this time, with over 1,000 organisations applying to run side events and 300 applications for exhibitions, I am delighted to see that we are all asked to merge with other organisations, to collaborate – even before we arrive in Glasgow in November. We have been approached by a huge energy organisation in Argentina and a tiny community renewable energy project in Denmark. Collaboration is the essence of this very urgent international treaty-making event.

In my union, UCU, we have been building alliances with students through SOS – Students Organising for Sustainability – and local Student Union associations like People and Planet. Nationally UCU has produced a Bargaining Guide for Green reps and that encourages inter-union campaigns and practical demands on

employers. Students had led on the fight to get our university to divest from fossil fuels and won, but only after eight years of consistent struggle. And still there is no actual evidence of how the money will be moved to support the emerging Green Economy. So we have to maintain pressure and push for climate aware teaching and research that actively prepares all students for action in the roles they take on after their education and training.

Indeed, I think that training and education is the fundamental to our environmental movement. With the death of Unionlearn, it is refreshing to see Unite setting up an environmental taskforce for workplace change and stressing the need to go back to clear values of sustainability. Unison has been strong on decarbonising the workplace, and the anti-fracking and water quality campaigns of the Bakers' Union are legendary. The FBU know well the risks of fire and flood. We all know this is the biggest health and safety issue we have ever faced.

Unite's slogan is "We do it together". But this doesn't just happen by itself. The idea of "co-creation" of campaigns doesn't come easy, especially when everybody is socially distanced because of Covid. We have to make a conscious effort to seek out the other unions representing our colleagues in each large workplace and encourage small business staff to join their relevant trades union. In fact the YouTube videos of Zoom meetings co-ordinated by the general secretary of UCU show that with some care we can begin to share campaigns and add new voices to the demand for well insulated workplaces, renewable energy investments, low carbon travel plans, food strategies and land use generally. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/environment>

This shows the benefits of consulting colleagues first about what they see as priorities for change. And finding out what management is planning anyway. It also stresses working with "service users", in this case – students. And as women we are always well placed to ask before we leap into action that people can't own. And we are aware that many of our colleagues are also parents and grandparents, with children who are very climate-aware and often very anxious that so little seems to be being done beyond the greenwash. The NEU is also working on school campaigns and insisting that the government re-instates environmental education into the state curriculum in England as it is in Scotland. So we can all reach towards our local schools and ask them how we can help them prepare their carbon reduction plans. We can suggest they take the lead on ward carbon planning. The future generation of a green workforce is still in school, so we have them as allies too. We owe it to them. The climate crisis is an inter-generational injustice as well as a colonial injustice.

If COP 26 is to be successful, we need to use the imaginations and collaboration skills of women in trades unions, and make sure we merge our efforts and resist the marketing and glitz.

LYDIA MERYLL, ENVIRONMENT OFFICER,  
UCU NORTH WEST REGION

## last chance saloon



WE are in the last chance saloon. The forthcoming Conference of the Parties (COP)26 will be hosted by the UK in Glasgow in November. The head of climate at Greenpeace UK, Kate Blagojevic, said recently that the conference "isn't just the most important climate conference ever held but the most important international summit of all time". *The Guardian* 24 July 2021

The International Climate Committee warned on 9 August that irreversible changes are already with us and that we have just eight years to implement the necessary measures to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of runaway climate breakdown. [www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/09/climate-crisis-unequivocally-caused-by-human-activities-says-ipcc-report](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/09/climate-crisis-unequivocally-caused-by-human-activities-says-ipcc-report)

This spring and summer have seen wildfires, drought, extreme floods, mudslides, torrential rains, unbearably high temperatures and a growth in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in many countries as a result of all this. Climate refugees are with us, whether they are in the North-West of England, the United States, Greece, or Turkey.

# cuba climate change plan

Here in the UK, we have seen at least a decade of delay, dither and kicking the can down the road, with coalition and Tory governments claiming to be the “greenest government ever” at the same time as they reduce support to measures enabling clean energy generation, and steer clear of serious debate about the action we must take, the bold announcements on carbon emission reduction.

## incompetent and hypocritical

Boris Johnson leads a government strong on “world beating” rhetoric, chasing media headlines, and weak and hypocritical on delivery. We see this with the response to Covid-19, with refusal to ensure vaccine justice internationally and in the cutting of international aid.

Johnson’s government has failed to rule out a new oilfield in the North Sea and a new coalmine in Cumbria. Its Plan for Zero Carbon relies too much on gimmicks like carbon offsetting or on technical solutions still to be invented.

Carbon offsets involve one (usually rich) country buying “credits” from projects in (usually poor) countries elsewhere. They are essentially greenwash, ineffective at securing real change, and give licence to polluters to continue as usual. But the Chancellor of the Exchequer wants the UK to become a global hub for such trading!

## women and children most affected

In all of this, it easy to lose sight of the fact that women and children are the people worst affected by the climate emergency – breathing polluted air, drinking dirty water, suffering extreme temperatures. This is especially true of women and children in the poorest countries. They experience worse health, worse housing, degraded and polluted environments, lower quality and scarce food, water scarcity.

Unless we pull together internationally to design and implement holistic climate justice alongside the task of bringing forward targets and actual tangible and deliverable policies to cut global emissions enough, we are bound to see more deaths from extreme events, more climate migrants (to be excoriated in the same way as so-called “economic migrants”?) and outbreaks of conflict over food and water.

## work on a number of fronts

We need now, as women committed to social and economic justice, to integrate climate justice into our thought and action. Acknowledging our own feelings of climate anxiety, we need to continue to work on a number of fronts – and, from my perspective, these remain fundamentally allied to the UN Declaration on Women from 1995, where the emphasis was on equality, development, peace.

We must

- Build women’s voice and engagement
- Invest in the girl-child/listen to the children.

**C**LIMATE change is driven by the overconsumption of wealthy capitalist countries, so needless to say, this is a crisis not of Cuba’s making. Nevertheless, Cuba is facing immediate and current threats from increased ferocity of hurricanes, droughts and flooding. The average annual temperature in Cuba has increased by nearly one degree Celsius since the middle of last century. Since 1960, rainfall patterns have changed, droughts have increased significantly, and the average sea level has risen by 6.77cm to date. Coastal flooding, caused by the rising sea level and strong waves, represents a great danger to the natural heritage and to buildings along the coast.

Cuba has a comprehensive plan for mitigating the effects of climate change in which women play a central role. The plan is known as Tarea Vida (Project Life in English). The approach taken to mitigate climate change is a combination of commitment and leadership by central government, and the localisation of detailed planning and preparation, with the participation of communities and local scientific expertise.

Women are involved in all elements of Tarea Vida, both in terms of scientific expertise needed to elaborate plans and research solutions, and also in the practical implementation of the plans. Cuba’s capacity for managing climate change stems from the education revolution which occurred after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which provided all women with educational opportunities, previously unavailable to them. This has allowed women to fully participate in public life, including leadership roles. For example:

The Ministry for Science, Technology and the Environments (CITMA) is, since

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We have to

- demand that the UK U-turns on plans to reduce the aid budget and announces ring-fenced support for poorer countries to tackle and adapt to climate change, bringing women’s priorities to the fore.
- “make it large”, think big, think strategically, and insist that the government practise what it preaches. For the UK we must see a nationwide energy efficiency programme with money to decarbonise home heating; the transition programme will create new jobs.

The input of trade unions and NGOs on a UK and international level is vital in all of this, ensuring debate and action focused on real change rather than rhetoric. Part of this is to turn away from militarism, nuclear expansion and Cold War ideology against Russia and China

The COP must not be a stage on which to strut and proclaim but a real success. We cannot afford for the talks to fail.

PAM FLYNN IS CHAIR OF GREATER MANCHESTER CND AND MEMBER OF NAW

2012, headed by Elba Rosa Pérez Montoya. CITMA plays a major role in supporting and directing the implementation of Tarea Vida, as well as responding to hurricanes and pandemics and directing scientific research in Cuba.

Two thirds of positions in Cuba’s science and technology sector are held by women, which is one of the highest percentages in the world, compared with roughly 25% in Europe and 11% in the UK. Women also make up nearly 30% of the members of the Cuban Academy of Sciences (Lilliam Álvarez Diaz is the executive secretary), compared with 10% in the United States. They comprise 50% of those who work in engineering, a field which is historically exclusively male; in Britain the figure is 11%.

In 2000, Cuba’s Local Agricultural Innovation Project (PIAL) was formed to increase food system sustainability and community resilience. It works to include women in the development and implementation of innovative agricultural practices. It has a national coordinator responsible for gender, specific gender strategies, and building rural women’s capacity to engage in agricultural innovation and leadership.

National guidelines were introduced in 2014. The document containing the guidelines mentions the contributions of the director of the National Institute of Agricultural Sciences, the director of Projects and Programmes at the Agency for the Environment and the director of Local Agriculture Innovation Projects – all these directors are women.

In April 2021 Cuba won access to almost \$24 million from the Green Climate Fund for a coastal resilience project, which supports one area that Tarea Vida called ‘Mi Costa’ – my coast. It is specifically to support work along 1,300 km of coastline across 24 municipalities, and it will contribute to Cuba’s efforts in achieving sustainable development goals, helping Cuba to achieve its commitment to the Paris Agreement. An integral part of Cuba’s application for funding was a ‘gender action plan’, which includes specific training for women, employment opportunities arising from the project, women’s participation in monitoring the project’s progress, training in hydrological modelling and data management, and participating in decision-making forums.

Cuba’s efforts to implement its Tarea Vida plan, are being carried out in the context of the 60-year long financial, economic and commercial blockade imposed upon Cuba by the United States. It impacts on Cuba’s approach to realise its plans for climate change mitigation, as well as making life generally more difficult for women as mothers, daughters, partners, and workers.

DR LAUREN COLLINS  
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# women in afghanistan

**F**OUR decades ago, the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was in power. The government was secular not religious and the country a republic. The advances the PDPA government made in the late 1970s and 1980s for the people of Afghanistan, and for women in particular, were enormous – before the US and its allies, including Britain, NATO, the theocratic dictatorships in Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the secret services of Pakistan, together with the most reactionary forces in Afghanistan, shamefully brought it down in 1992.

Moves to release women from centuries of feudal subjugation and less than human treatment had begun in earnest in the 1920s, profoundly influenced by the 1917 Revolution which replaced the Tzar's Russian empire with a socialist republic, with which Afghanistan signed a friendship treaty in 1921. As time progressed, the bid to secure equal rights for women was driven by an influential women's movement. Women were first accepted at the University of Kabul in the early 1950s. Afghanistan's 1964 constitution introduced, at least on paper, universal suffrage, the right of women to run for public office, enter the professions and appear unveiled in public. However, practice dragged far behind the letter of law, especially (not exclusively) in rural areas.

The PDPA government was determined to change this on a permanent basis. Huge strides were made in embedding women's rights, as well as in building the infrastructure of a country on a democratic and peaceful path, developing public services, bringing access to education and healthcare to all and eradicating poverty. This momentum was witnessed in 1988 when the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) sent a delegation to Afghanistan in which the then president of the NAW, Barbara Switzer, participated.

It was destroyed in 1992 for no other reason than to secure geo-political control of Afghanistan, and access to its valuable resources, for US imperialism, regardless of the cost to the people and the country's trajectory out of feudalism. It was a disaster for the women of Afghanistan and laid open the path for the Taliban, enabling the ruthless Islamic fundamentalists trained in Pakistan, to take power in 1996 and impose Sharia law. This put the struggle of women against violence and for equal rights back by decades. But the incoming Taliban regime was seen by the West as one which would stifle, albeit brutally, the development of any progressive tendencies in Afghanistan – without the US and allies having to lift a finger in the country, while always leaving imperialism with a pretext to intervene directly should its hegemonistic designs require it. Concern for women's rights, democracy, and progress for the mass of people featured not at all in imperialist thinking.



Five years later, following the Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001, the US and allies opted once more for direct intervention in Afghanistan, the so-called "War on Terror", though Saudi Arabia was demonstrably the source of most Al Qaeda commanders and combatants and their funding. Having attacked Al Qaeda bases in the Tora Bora cave complex in eastern Afghanistan, close to the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the real purpose of the catastrophic intervention was revealed – to oust the Taliban, which had served their purpose, and put a directly pro-US regime into Kabul backed by an international imperialist army of occupation. It led to 20 years of war in which Afghanistan was laid waste.

Public opinion worldwide was fed the myth that all this was somehow about following up Al Qaeda's defeat with humanitarian support for the people and protection of women's rights was frequently referenced. Across the world, however, those struggling against war in Afghanistan and for the right of the Afghan people to determine their own future, totally rejected that "justification". That they were right to do so has now been vindicated. John Bolton, former US ambassador to the United Nations in 2005-6 and Donald Trump's national security officer in 2018-19 has categorically stated in recent weeks that the US operation in Afghanistan had nothing to do with supporting its people, nor with bringing democracy nor with charitable assistance. It was only ever about pursuing the interests of the United States.

In the light of that, we would do well to be cautious about labelling the exit of America and its allies a "defeat". The planned reinstatement of the Taliban presents significant economic, political, and strategic advantages to the US. Three presidents – Obama, Trump, and Biden – have worked over a number of years to extricate their forces and concentrate them elsewhere, including on the Asia-Pacific seaboard, in their mounting confrontation with rival China. Ongoing war

in Afghanistan has also offered no possibility of exploiting the rich deposits of minerals with which to fuel the global transition from oil-based to electric-powered transport, a multi-trillion-dollar transition that the conglomerates and governments of imperialist countries are determined to control. Presence of the biggest supply of lithium for batteries anywhere, means the eyes of the world are on it. So far as the West is concerned, the Taliban also offer the potential of exporting radical Islamic destabilisation to neighbours and rivals – in the north to former Soviet republics allied with the Russian Federation, and in the east to China's western provinces. They also ensure that progressive changes are threatened and thwarted across the region and that a continually unstable Middle East can be maintained in which US, Britain and allied powers can implement their strategies at will. This is why the US has been in protracted negotiations with the Taliban and planned its return to power with not a care for the impact on the Afghan people and the horror for women, as events in August have shown.

The women of Afghanistan are right to dread the reimposition of Sharia law by the Taliban and to reject their public relations announcements that, provided women live by it, they will be safe. Many have long memories of former Taliban atrocities and already moves against women, including physical attacks, rape, and sexual assaults, forced marriages, including of children, and exclusion from study, work and the social sphere have, within days, shown what is in store with unbridled fundamentalism. In a recent statement of solidarity with the women of Afghanistan the Democratic Organisation of Iranian Women (a member of the WIDF) has said: "We, the people of Iran and Afghanistan... both carry the wounds inflicted on us by political Islam, with backwardness and misogyny as its main characteristic."

The presidency of the WIDF has called on us all to stand with Afghan women in defending their rights. As Sahra Karimi, the famous Afghan filmmaker, put it, we must be their voice outside the borders of Afghanistan. That means showing publicly and repeatedly that the US and British never did and still do not care about women and girls there. It means opposing further intervention of any kind on the part of our government in Afghanistan and putting all pressure possible on Westminster to sever Britain's toxic partnership with the US and involvement in NATO. It also means working in solidarity with the women of Afghanistan and their organisations and with all progressive currents to support the people's struggle against poverty, war, and discrimination and for a democratic and peaceful future.

LIZ PAYNE IS A MEMBER OF THE NAW EC

# farewell mama thembi

PHILIPPA CLARK REMEMBERS AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS LEADER THEMBI NOBADULA

It was with great sadness that in May we learned of the death of our dear Sister and Comrade, Thembi Nobadula.

Thembi was a key figure in organising the huge women's demonstration in Pretoria in 1956 against the extension of the pass laws to women. She then had to leave South Africa, her home and family to go into exile. She came to London where she worked to establish and build resistance and solidarity through the ANC in exile and the Anti-Apartheid movement to end the evil of the South African government.

30 years after Thembi played a major role in the Pretoria Women's march it was decided to organise a celebration of those women in Finsbury Park in London on South African Women's Day – August 1986. The lead was taken by the ANC Women's League which was represented on the organising committee by Adelaide Tambo and Thembi. It was a huge and successful event addressed by the communist activist, Angela Davis. Barbara Switzer, then deputy general secretary of the trade union TASS and former NAW president, also spoke.

## thembi, tireless in action

It was as trade unionists that we came to know Thembi. She represented the ANC at many conferences and events to garner support to bring down the vicious Apartheid South African government. Her politics meant that she knew the importance, the significance of trade unions in any fight against oppression and injustice.

Through the gift of Thembi's friendship we came to know of her heroic contribution in the African National Congress as a fighter for freedom because her modesty belied the many sacrifices she made, the immense courage she demonstrated in the face of a murderous regime. Her absolute determination to effect change for her people, working in the banned ANC to establish a democratic South Africa. When we attended trade union and NAW events with Thembi we particularly enjoyed her stories about challenging male attitudes – in her family, community and her organisation which she always related with a customary wry smile. As women in the UK trade union movement we could well relate to this!

Thembi, Mama Thembi, was held in great esteem by the ANC and sat next to presidents of the free South Africa when they visited the UK. Her conversations were always honest and frank. She did not demur when she thought something was wrong, including in the organisation to which she devoted her life. Thembi was a freedom fighter and a democrat through and through. High office or posi-



LEFT TO RIGHT IN THE HIGHLANDS: RUTH WINTERS, PHILIPPA CLARK, THEMBI NOBADULA, BARBARA SWITZER

tion did not impress her. She was friends with heads of state. She shared hardships with people whose names are now renowned worldwide. What mattered most to Thembi was not who you were but what you did.

Thembi knew the current South African high commissioner, Nomatember Tambo, from her birth. She was a great friend of the high commissioner's parents, Adelaide and Oliver Tambo. Nomatember spoke so movingly at Thembi's funeral of her influence whilst she was growing up. She recounted that when Thembi was at last able to return to a free South Africa – over 30 years after she had to leave – she went to her home township Benoni. The Tambos wanted their old friend to live nearer to them but Thembi felt she could be of more use in the place where she grew up. Typical Thembi.

Her family all lived in London so eventually she returned to be with them. A loving family, they enjoyed her zest for life, the holidays and seaside trips she organised, her sense of humour and fun. Her mischievous streak was greatly enjoyed by her grandchildren and great grandchildren.

They spoke movingly at the celebration of Thembi's life which was a memorable occasion. Her friend and comrade, Lindiwe Poswa was resplendent in ANC colours as were so many of the women present. Lindiwe remembering how they met so many years ago in exile. An ANC flag of flowers – black, green and yellow. Exuberant political singing from members of the ANC Women's League. Many members of the church which Thembi attended in London also came along and there was plenty of food and wine. It was a fitting tribute to a remarkable woman.

Our particular memories which we hold very dear are threefold:

The day Nelson Mandela made a private visit to meet London ANC comrades in our union office – packed of course. In the front row, toy toying enthusiastically

was Mama Thembi – on crutches!

Barbara Switzer, former vice president of the Anti-Apartheid movement, and I visiting South Africa after the first democratic election, to be greeted by a hugely smiling Thembi waving from a window, welcoming us to her home in Benoni. Welcoming us to the South Africa for which she fought so valiantly.

Thembi visiting the Highlands of Scotland with Barbara, Ruth Winters, first woman president of the Fire Brigades Union, and NAW member Nuala Cameron, sharing the pleasure of showing her its beautiful scenery and spending precious time with her.

We will remember her courage and her acute political analysis. Her open heartedness and generosity to those of us of the same skin colour as her brutal oppressors. We will remember all she taught us about equality and her sense of humour.

## to honour her we said at her funeral:

"Humankind's dearest possession is life. It is given to us but once, and we must live it so as to feel no regrets for wasted years. So live that, dying, we might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world – the fight for the Liberation of Humanity"

Mama Thembi devoted her life to the finest of causes. She lives on through her family and in the hearts and minds of the many of us she inspired in the trade union movement and the NAW.

Farewell Mama Thembi.

# National Assembly of Women weekend conference

is just around the corner!

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

*The changing world of work for women, with Sian Elliott TUC, Sarah Woolley BFAWU, Claudia Webbe MP*

Contact [megan@gn.apc.org](mailto:megan@gn.apc.org) for an invoice and see [www.sisters.org.uk](http://www.sisters.org.uk) for more details

THE SYLVIA PANKHURST MEMORIAL LECTURE 2021 WAS HELD 7 AUGUST AT WORTLEY HALL, THE WORKERS' STATELY HOME. THE SYLVIA PANKHURST MEMORIAL COMMITTEE (BELOW: MEGAN DOBNEY, BARBARA SWITZER, MARY DAVIS, PHILIPPA CLARK) WAS JOINED BY NEARLY 50 PEOPLE "IN THE FLESH" AS WELL AS BY ONLINE PARTICIPANTS. PROFESSOR MARY DAVIS SPOKE ON *WOMEN, RACE AND CLASS – THEN AND NOW* AND THE LECTURE WAS FOLLOWED BY THE USUAL WELL-INFORMED DEBATE!



## WIDF



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION UPDATE

THE European organisation of the WIDF held a teleconference on 23 July, chaired by European Vice President, Skevi Koukouma, and attended by representatives of affiliated organisations from Britain, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Iran, Italy, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Turkey, and Spain. Liz Payne reported for the NAW on the situation in Britain and our activities since the last meeting (see [www.sisters.org/documents](http://www.sisters.org/documents)). Concern at, and actions to combat, attacks on women and women's rights were reported by all.

The meeting agreed a message of solidarity with the Cuban people, "the proud women of Cuba" and their WIDF-affiliated organisation, the Federation of Cuban Women, in the face of US intervention aimed at overthrowing the Cuban Revolution.

At world level, the WIDF Secretariat has recently issued a statement expressing grave concern at the political harassment of our world president, by the government of El Salvador where she is based.

The Secretariat is planning to hold the 17th World Congress, postponed from 2020, in 2022.

## what's on...

NAW Executive Committee meetings are open to all members.

The next will be on Saturday 13 November. If you would like to attend please contact the Secretary on [naw@sisters.org.uk](mailto: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)

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