



SOME OF THE  
DELEGATES AT THE  
NAWIS ANNUAL  
SEMINAR SEE PAGE 2

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P WINTER 2021/2

# Activists



# the changing world of work...

NAW SECRETARY  
SANDRA DURKIN LEFT  
WITH SIAN ELLIOTT  
FROM THE TUC



**T**he National Assembly of Women weekend conference held in Birmingham last October was a huge success. As Sarah Woolley, general secretary of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union remarked “What’s even more special is that we are here together in person.” Delegates from a wide range of unions and organisations gathered for two days of debate and discussion.

The weekend started with an informative and detailed analysis from Sian Elliott, senior policy officer at the TUC, about the essential role women have played during the pandemic across all sectors. “Women have been on the frontline of key workers during the pandemic yet one fifth are using a foodbank or have a second job” she said.

Sarah Woolley, General Secretary of the Bakers Food & Allied Workers Union, followed with a powerful speech illustrating the positive impact that women’s participation has in the trade union movement. Recalling her personal experience as a young union member in Greggs Bakery (formerly Baker’s Oven), the positive support she received from women union officers and her subsequent election as the first woman general secretary of her union, she emphasised the need for women to support and encourage each other at every level in our movement.

Fran Heathcote, PCS president, echoed this view in her speech on Sunday, saying that trade union leaderships should reflect their membership and women’s involvement was vital. She said that the odds were already stacked against women, with many having to work several jobs to make ends meet and the pandemic has made this far worse.

The final contribution was from NAW EC member, Liz Payne who gave an update on the situation of our sisters in Afghanistan following her comprehensive article in the last edition of *sisters*.

There were break-out groups and brilliant contributions from delegates and the conference closed with everyone feeling energised by the discussions and lively exchanges, ready to face the many challenges ahead.

## The essential role of women in public services

FRAN HEATHCOTE, PRESIDENT OF THE  
PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES UNION

I want to talk about the essential role that women in public services have played during the pandemic across all sectors. Women are low paid and face occupational segregation. We need to consider the national economic reality – we face a very difficult period ahead.

The truth is that we are fast heading into a standard of living crisis:

- A public sector pay freeze, low wage economy
- The government’s attack on public sector pensions
- A hike in National Insurance contributions
- The slashing of the Universal Credit uplift
- An assault on public services generally
- A government agenda of privatisation
- Decimation of decent social security
- Austerity
- Precarious work and zero-hour contracts
- Attacks on the National Health Service
- Fire & Rehire
- Increase in incidents of domestic violence throughout the pandemic, where people cannot easily get away from their homes.

These are all issues which disproportionately impact on women. Our terms and conditions were fought for over generations, and we need to support and organise these women to defend them against attack.

When I first joined the Civil Service 28 years ago, I remember my dad saying “Civil Service – job for life. The wages aren’t the best, but you get a decent pension”.

The reality now is somewhat different, but the reality of being a civil servant is nothing like the image created in the media ‘bowler hatted, overpaid, drinking tea’, yet 40% of my department are entitled to Universal Credit, and other in-work benefits – the same benefits that they process, ironically, due to low pay. This is the same media that demonises benefit claimants, and as a union, PCS does a lot of work to debunk the myths and make clear that benefit claimants face similar attacks that our members do, from an ideology-driven government, and we need to recognise that the source of these attacks is exactly the same.

Many government workers now are



outsourced. Workers who would have traditionally been civil servants, are employed by companies who bid for government contracts on the basis of minimal pay, terms and conditions.

We have a government that rolls out the mantra of 'private = good, public = wasteful and inefficient', selling lucrative contracts with no thought to how they can deliver, or the staff employed by them. Unfortunately, it is women and black members who are disproportionately impacted by the conditions introduced by these contractors, and we now have a real focus not just on equality and increasing participation, but on organising and recruiting our outsourced workers, so that they can campaign for better.

Throughout the pandemic, it was key workers, many of them women, who kept the country running, putting their lives at risk to deliver vital services. These workers need to be rewarded with a standard of living that they can get by on.

I want to give a shout out to our DVLA members, a large proportion female with a female branch leadership, who have organised in the face of a hostile employer, a dispute all about keeping safe during the pandemic, and not about money as Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps MP has tried to claim. They have taken unprecedented amounts of strike action in the fight for a safe workplace and transformed the union culture there in the process, getting far more female reps and advocates involved, as well as recruiting many new members.

But the odds are stacked against women in many ways. We see our own members in receipt of Universal Credit, doing two or three jobs to get by. Women facing benefit sanctions, for taking low paid work and not being able to increase their hours due to caring responsibilities. This government and its predecessors have created a new layer in society, the working poor, for whom wages are so low, that they are still reliant on benefits and subject to benefit sanctions.

What sort of society do we live in where women become too afraid to walk home in the wake of the murder of Sarah

Everard, where the police employed to keep people safe are part of the problem, and where the advice from government to women who feel unsafe is "just flag down a bus". Have you ever tried to get a bus to stop for you in Clapham, because I have?

Sisters, it has to change, and we must all join together to ensure that it does.

The world of work is changing, and in the aftermath of the pandemic, we are seeing the introduction of hybrid working, which will bring its own set of organising challenges for trade unions, but also a government desperate to find scapegoats to pay the price of the pandemic, and so we will be dealing with many issues over redundancy, job cuts, office closures and linked to these, the provision of public services. It's a challenging time and one where we need women to have a voice at every table.

So, how do we increase participation?

I was very lucky as I was getting involved to have good, strong female role models and lots of encouragement. I initially wasn't very confident about putting arguments forward, but over time that confidence grew and now I try to use my role to encourage and mentor other women.

I covered a senior role in PCS when a close comrade suffered a bereavement and when he returned to work, as succession planning (or "step aside, brother", as it is sometimes known), he fully supported me in eventually standing for election in his place. So sometimes, in my experience, men can also be good allies and support women in coming through, and we should recognise that too.

I was very well-supported by my predecessor, Janice Godrich, who was a fantastic role model, and when her circumstances changed overnight and I was suddenly expected to take over, whilst it was a huge step up, and not something I had ever anticipated, sometimes you have to do just that, step up and make the role your own. It was a steep learning curve, but I was again, well supported.

The key is that we want our leadership

to truly reflect our membership, and with a workforce that is two-thirds female in PCS, we always need more women to get active and play a role. I don't support tokenism though, and think we need to keep a balance between full support and encouragement and recognising that we need a good mix of candidates standing in all elections.

PCS has evolved a lot over the nearly 30 years I have been involved, and through initiatives such as Count Me In, the introduction of reserved seats on executive committees, trainee delegates to conference prioritising under-represented groups and the work of our equality committees, we are now seeing much more diversity at every level, although there is always room for improvement.

When I first got involved in what was then CPSSA, there was little training and support, and no local training provision. Now we put a lot of focus into training and support and try to make sure that we genuinely keep equality at the heart of everything we do, and that it isn't just a slogan. PCS is currently focusing on building participation, how we can get members, with a particular focus on women, to play a greater role. Recognising that the increased use of digital technology has allowed more women to participate and in different ways.

We are also looking at local activism and building activism in a locality, which includes community campaigning and non-traditional activity outside of the ordinary structures.

People will join and get involved, when the union seems relevant to them and so our job is to work constantly to encourage activity and buy-in in everything that we are doing.

In closing, I want to say that events like this are brilliant. The opportunity to really discuss the challenges we face as women, in the context of the political and economic situation we are in, is one of the things I have missed most over the last 18 months or so, so I really welcome the opportunity to meet you all and hope





# ...the changing world of work

that we can get lots of discussion about how we support each other, how we build strong networks and how we can work together to get a better deal for women in the workplace.

Thank you for listening, and on behalf of PCS, Solidarity.

## we need to lift each other up

**SARAH WOOLLEY, GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE BAKERS, FOOD AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION**

**I**T is an absolute pleasure to be here this weekend alongside such powerful and inspirational sisters.

This morning, I'm going to tell you a bit about me; touch on some of the issues our members have faced through the pandemic, many of which weren't new issues let's be honest they have just been magnified, or speeded up; some wins our female members and reps have had; some of the challenges we have going forward in workplaces and opportunities we have as a movement, then open it up to listen to you!

I'm Sarah Woolley, the first female general secretary the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union has ever had, the first female national officer in fact, which isn't great for one of the oldest trade unions in the UK with nearly 50% women membership, I know though unfortunately that it is a situation that most of our movement has faced and is facing.

That's why still even now that we have women leading the TUC, Scottish and Welsh TUCs as well as women leading some of the biggest unions in the movement, it is still seen by many as a movement for older white men. I'm hoping to change that and I'll come on to that in a little while.

I joined the union at 16 when I started working for Bakers Oven and for years I

wasn't active, I couldn't have told you who my rep was and in fact once or twice when I got into a spot of bother, usually after I had challenged my manager, I had to turn to the full time officials in the region for support, when Greggs took us over I met my new branch secretary and that all changed, he thought I would make a good rep, I agreed to try it and the rest as they say is history, I caught the bug. As I worked in a predominantly female environment in Greggs shops the branch certainly in the retail side had some amazing female reps, it still has, one of them Ruth is now the branch secretary, I should mention my old Greggs branch is the biggest branch in the union we are all very proud of that.

Whilst I have unconditional support from my partner, my son and my family, Ruth the current branch sec and Ange one of the senior shop stewards are my sisters, there's no other word to describe them, they showed me the ropes in the union, they pushed our old branch sec to nominate me for the union's youth award, encouraged me to stand for the female executive council position and later as a regional full time official and then general secretary, when I questioned whether I could do the roles – I've done that a lot over the years, they told me I was born to do it, when I have had issues within the roles they have been my ears and my support – it's been difficult the last 18 months not being able to have our regular conversations in a pub to be honest and equally when our old branch sec Keith retired, me and Ange encouraged and supported Ruth in breaking tradition in our branch and becoming the first female, retail branch sec as they had been from the bakery and male previously.

It's not been smooth sailing, there have been times as a paid official where me being relatively young and female, have caused older branch secretaries to question what I could do to support them, they have challenged me in ways that they wouldn't my male counterparts and not



listened to my advice like they would have done had I been male, and it's been at these times Ruth and Ange would swear a little and tell me they were the problem with our movement and once I became general secretary everything would be OK – it doesn't really work like that, but I am determined that our union and our wider movement needs to be more inclusive, I don't want any other women feeling like I did when a branch secretary swore and threatened me because he didn't like how I had worded a report – realistically it was more because I wouldn't go for a meal with him, but his anger was focused on the report I had written. I know I won't be alone in this room experiencing that and I want to make sure that sexual harassment and violence has no place in our movement just as it shouldn't in our members' workplaces or society as a whole. Our union has signed up to a general secretary charter against sexual harassment and violence set up by a group called Sisters to the Front, a network for women officials in our movement and we have put in place an email





address initially whilst we work on a proper structure and policy that members and employees can use to report any inappropriate behaviour so that it can be challenged and dealt with.

Because I'm honoured to be able to lead our union in its next stages, one that is inclusive and safe and hopefully me being in the position of general secretary, other women will be inspired to stand for positions and make their voice louder in our union and wider movement, it's absolutely no good me getting to be the first woman general secretary of the bakers but pulling up the ladder behind me and preventing others progressing, it achieves nothing. I want more Ruths, we need more Ruths.

The last 18 months have been horrendous, thanks in the main to the continued miss management by the government leaving employers to exploit the pandemic situation in many cases, and we know that women as a result have been impacted disproportionately and will continue to be however long this lasts, because let's be honest though we have an equality act and an equal pay act, we know that for many they are distant pieces of legislation that don't mean a right lot in reality. Women are still generally paid less than their male colleagues, are more likely to work part time and have caring responsibilities and are definitely going to be doing as much unpaid work as they do paid, if not more because of those caring responsibilities, the pandemic has simply magnified the issue.

We have seen a worrying continued rise in domestic violence cases and deaths, the pressure of working from home as well as home-schooling has pretty much fallen on the shoulders of women and for those that have continued to work in workplaces, NHS, teaching staff, carers, postal workers and our own members in the food industry to name a few have done so under extreme pressure. They have had to adapt to massive continued changes in working practices, fighting for PPE in lots of cases, adhering to social distancing measures and shift changes or remote working for parts of the week, dealing with short staff situations due to the pandemic and certainly, in our members' cases, a sharp increase in demand for the products they make about 18 months ago, that hasn't really gone back down, that is going to increase again in the coming weeks when panic buying starts for Christmas and having to work harder because there are so many vacancies with little respect or thanks from the public for doing so.

What the pandemic has highlighted though is that for years when employers have said things like working from home isn't possible we need you here, we can't allow you to start and finish your shift half an hour early or late, or we can't let you only work four days a week instead of five all because of business needs, it was unnecessary, when it has suited them over the last 18 months they have been



open to doing all that and more and we know they will claim that it was to keep people safe, and in many cases it will have been, on the back of the hard work of our health and safety reps mind, but it has showed that it can be done without it being a catastrophe and going forwards women in particular should be able to continue to work flexibly.

What we need to do as trade unions is to ensure that going forwards we don't allow employers to say yes but that was due to the pandemic when it suits them and to force things like homeworking permanently, purely to save them money regardless of the impact it may have on our members and their mental health and look inwards at ourselves as trade unions, our structures, our rules and see how we can remove the barriers to women participating and stepping up into branch, regional and national positions.

I do think that our movement is slowly changing, moving away from the white male and stale position it has for so long been seen as. I'm proud to be here amongst such strong women, that will contribute to that change. I know I have a big responsibility because as I have already mentioned, it's not enough just having a female general secretary in post, we need women to be empowered and in leadership positions throughout our membership and throughout our movement.

We want women leading strike actions as Debbie did as the branch secretary of Pennine Foods in Sheffield a few years ago now, we want women leading the

negotiations with companies, representing members and highlighting the issues they face just like the retail partnership forum group do with Greggs, we want to empower women to speak out on sexual harassment just as our members in McDonalds have done. And we want women breaking tradition in their branches like Ruth did in ours.

Because those are the discussions we should be having and the changes that should be made.

Sexual harassment and violence, period poverty, pensions, menopause, domestic violence all need to be conversations we are having openly and honestly with our members, giving branches the tools to negotiate around them – paid time off for example if someone needs to escape a domestic violence situation, free sanitary products in workplaces, a clear reporting system for sexual harassment with accountability and ensuring that when risk assessments are completed the symptoms of menopause are taken into account.

Having these as serious issues that are at the front of our discussions with members and their employers will show that we are serious about the issues women face and will encourage women to engage in our movement as a result.

This isn't anything new, some unions are further along with these areas than others in terms of draft policies to take to workplaces and there are some that have begun training but what we tend to find is

*concluded on back page*



# a reminder: a visit to Kabul

## women in Afghanistan - an update

BY NAW EC MEMBER LIZ PAYNE

**T**HE Georgetown Institute's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/22 shines a light on the dire situation in Afghanistan immediately prior to the US-negotiated Taliban return to government. It highlights that years of occupation and conflict did nothing to alleviate the exclusion and misery of Afghan women, whatever the mass media may try to tell us about the supposed intentions of the US and Britain. Afghanistan was ranked worst by far of the 170 countries included in the study. Women felt least safe to be out and about in their immediate surroundings. In parts of the country, as many as 90% of men considered wife-beating 'a norm'. Provincial statistics for girls in secondary education ranged from 51% in Panjshir down to just 2% in Paktika and, in 10 provinces, 6% or less women were in employment.

Fears of further deterioration as the Taliban imposed Sharia Law have proven well-founded. Severe restrictions on participation in education and work continue. Dress codes are strictly enforced. Television broadcasters have been told to stop showing films starring women. Most recently, at the end of December, the government's Ministry of Command and Prohibition announced that no woman may travel more than 45 miles from home unless accompanied by a close male relative.

But organised protests continue, as brave women come onto the streets risking brutal Taliban violence. Two demonstrations took place in Kabul on 28 December. One condemned the hunting down, torture and killing of former government workers. The other challenged discriminatory regulations imposed on women in the public sphere.

A spokesperson for the Afghan progressive opposition recently noted that Taliban "resistance to even basic notions of women's rights will remain firm" but described the women's movement in the country as "courageous and vigilant", stressing the crucial role of the international movement in demanding respect for women's rights as a pre-condition of any dealings with the Taliban.

[HTTPS://GIWPS.GEORGETOWN.EDU/THE-INDEX/](https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/)

BARBARA SWITZER, FORMER NAW VICE PRESIDENT, VISITED KABUL IN 1988. HERE IS HER REPORT...

**O**N 24 March 1988 I arrived in Moscow en route to Kabul, Afghanistan, via Tashkent, as a representative of the National Assembly of Women (NAW), part of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) delegation to an international peace conference on the Role of Public Opinion in Resolving Regional Conflicts.

There was a certain excitement in the air that such a conference should be taking place in Kabul at the same time that negotiations were taking place in Geneva to conclude an agreement that would allow the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan – a very fitting location.

Travelling through the night to Kabul from Moscow is a long and tedious journey, but the anticipation of what was to come overcame all of that. Landing in Kabul on a clear morning is a spectacular sight – a city surrounded by a ring of mountains still snow covered. It was at this point that we had our first experience of a country engaged in conflict.

We saw many military aeroplanes and helicopters parked and some circling, dropping what appeared to be flares. We were later to discover that they were indeed flares, dropped to provide a heat shield to divert the US- and British-made heatseeking Stinger and Blowpipe missiles that had claimed one civil aircraft and all aboard in February and have since claimed another, not to mention all the other death and destruction over the past decade. We were taken to the Intercontinental Hotel for breakfast – a strange affair – tea and acid cakes followed by fried eggs and various meats and cheese, all very welcome. Then much needed sleep.

Our second experience of a country at war (albeit undeclared) was a visit to the cemetery, to take part in a wreath laying

ceremony to honour those who sacrificed their lives. A desolate place, stretching for what appeared to be miles, of dusty landscape covered with simple stones, marked by a variety of flags. A ceremony that was conducted with a great deal of moving dignity. On the way back we passed through the area of the army barracks and parade ground – on one side soldiers being drilled and a little distance away a group of about 40 young men in a variety of civilian dress, reporting for duty as new recruits – their girlfriends, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters looking on!

Later that day myself and a Swedish delegate met the President of the Women's Council, a body with an immense responsibility. It was through her that we were able to arrange a programme outside the conference that allowed us to make the maximum use of our time in Kabul. To meet other women and to witness their work that had a growing importance in the Programme of Reconciliation.

There was an air of optimism in the conference, a determination for the Geneva talks to succeed, with positive contributions from numerous countries: Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan itself. This optimism was blighted only by the news of the murder of Sister September of the African National Congress (ANC) in Paris, a moment felt deeply by all delegates, but more so by those from Africa.

On the first day the women delegates took a few hours to visit the Women's Council which was made up of women of high responsibility in the fields of education, health and welfare, development of skills and for bringing women into a society that had declared a policy of equality. Bringing women from a society of complete backwardness into one where they could develop themselves is no mean task.

Most of that development is done through a network of women's clubs centres in Kabul. There are 67 in total, 14 in



WIDF DELEGATION VISITING A KINDERGARTEN IN 1988





BARBARA SWITZER

cities, nine in districts, and 44 in the provinces. They teach basic skills, handicrafts, sewing, dressmaking, basic education such as reading etc. they also have a central clinic dealing with women's health and one of the priorities is to encourage more women to participate. There is no birth control as such but efforts are being made to lengthen the frequency with which each mother gives birth. The average births are seven per mother. Financial assistance is given by the clubs in return for work, together with food and excellent crèche facilities.

The facilities provided by the clubs would be the envy of many women's organisations here. 15,000 women have passed through the clubs and there are many very talented women whose skills need to be harnessed. The drawback is lack of raw materials and equipment such as sewing machines and educational materials.

The Women's Council is currently making plans to cope with the many women and children who will need assistance as the refugees return. Proposals have been made to UNICEF for assistance in re-establishing health clinics and mobile units – 155 clinics have been destroyed during the course of the conflict.

The illiteracy rate stood at approximately 95% at the point of the revolution,



LIZ PAYNE

this has dropped by approximately 10% again, no mean feat during a period of conflict. The young children going to and from school carrying their little cases was a joy to see.

Living in a well-equipped hotel above the outskirts of the city centre, looking down over the dusty and clay constructed town, gave a strange feeling of being in a different world (I suppose we were). I had a compelling determination to experience some of the real life and to try to communicate with the people.

There was no feeling of tension or undue restriction, but the authorities were very conscious of their responsibilities in keeping us safe. We therefore also had a responsibility to respect their wishes. We could not, in the main, travel any distance unescorted and certainly not at night. However, during one long break between sessions, a Cypriot delegate and myself decided to try a stroll through the streets. Had it been dangerous, the Afghan soldiers at the bottom of the hill would have advised otherwise. We managed to communicate and on we went amongst the compacted, clay, tiny dwellings on the hillside, amongst curious and sometimes shy children, but with an awareness that something important was going on up the hill – the main street was lined with thriving businesses, each probably no more

than six to eight feet square – no shortage of provisions or a willingness to try to converse. I took many wonderful photographs that I wish you all could see. We were invited inside one such place. The entrance no more than four foot high by three foot wide. Inside was a very dark room with shelves holding kitchen utensils. In the middle of the floor was a hole and in the centre a fire with a series of hooks around the perimeter. We learned that this was a small bakery for making flat unleavened bread that we had been eating for the past few days. It was baked by an old lady and two young girls – anxious to have their photographs taken.

The streets were busy, people going about their lives and children playing. Dusty, lacking in much of what we regard as basic necessity, people sometimes unkempt, but no sign of hunger, deprivation or despair. I suspect this was not the case further afield in the villages in the hills. I was surprised to learn that what we would regard as hillside hovels had running water and electricity, very basic but nonetheless available.

On the Friday before we left Kabul on the Saturday, the conference over, the Women's Council had arranged a series of visits. The first to the Women's Club I Kabul where we saw the wonderful embroidery worked by the women, the rug making, the modern kitchen that had been supplied by Czechoslovakia, the sewing room, the friendship room which displayed many of the souvenirs and gifts presented by friendly countries and delegations, and lastly the crèche. It really was quite breath-taking to see women participating where a short 10 years before they were nothing in what was regarded as the most backward of the under-developed countries.

From there we went to the Maternity Hospital. Very basic, very stark, but making a tremendous effort. In 1949 there were five staff and six beds. In 1988 there are 370 maternity beds, 150 obstetrics beds, 47 doctors and 118 nurses. It is the only hospital that provides such facilities. In the rural areas health centres deal with childbirth and there are 1,250 midwives. There are 30,000 births per year. An impossible task carried out with a great deal of courage. There are plans for three more such hospitals. In addition, in Kabul, there is a gynaecological hospital which caters for 9,000 per year.

The training for midwives is in two stages. Fundamental training for two months followed by 15 days more advanced training. The infant mortality rate is dropping slowly as is the rate of death amongst women giving birth. The Soviet Union has pledged assistance until, at least, the year 2000.

The next visit was to the orphanage. Many of the children had lost both parents, others one but who were not able to look after their children. The care of these children is a priority for the government which is committed to keeping the children together, particularly in families. The orphanage was founded in 1981 and has branches in 17 provinces. The orphanage is responsible for the education, health



KABUL STREETS IN 1979

and welfare and the cultural development of the children until it is appropriate for them to move on either to work or further education. They pass through the nursery, kindergarten and then school. The orphans are as young as a few months old. There is a well-equipped nursery for the younger children and the older children spend their free time entertaining themselves in their dormitories or common rooms, when they are not out on an excursion or participating in some sporting event. Support is given by friendly countries. Czechoslovakia has donated a well-equipped kitchen.

The orphans can be counted in thousands not hundreds. 1,800 have so far gone into further education in the Soviet Union and 800 for holidays, 300 to Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, others have taken smaller numbers for education and holidays. Again, there is a shortage of equipment and raw materials. It is staffed by very dedicated people. It was a chastening experience.

This was followed by a visit to the museum, where we saw captured weapons that were US-made Stinger missiles and British-made Blowpipe missiles – supplied to anti-government forces. We saw booby-trapped video cassettes and chemical weapons, we saw pictures of mutilated children and real examples of their damaged toys, which gave real life examples of the kind of injuries and mutilations suffered by the children.

There were signs of development in Kabul, modern buildings and schools, factories to develop industry. Mostly supplied by aid from the Soviet Union. The United States of America and Great Britain have a lot to say – but what do we do?

Before I went, I was as aware as one can be of the situation in Afghanistan – I left with a better understanding – a knowledge of the commitment by the government and particularly President Najibullah, who we were privileged to meet at a press conference. The programme of National Reconciliation is all important. I am more aware of the misinformation that is peddled in our press and by our media. It makes me very angry when I hear Sir Geoffrey Howe, Foreign Secretary, talk of occupying Soviet forces, when quite the opposite is the case. I saw no evidence of occupation. Would such a conference have been allowed in an occupied country?

A crucial part of Afghan foreign policy is friendship and trade with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. These treaties of friendship have existed between Afghanistan since 1919. What angers the Afghan people as well as those of us who know the truth, is the distortion and misinformation that is peddled by the USA, British and most of the Western media.

The Soviet Union is present in Afghanistan at the request of the Afghan government through these treaties. The people of Afghanistan are clear that progress and development can be achieved with the present government and are committed to the programme of reconciliation. They can succeed if they are let to. If they are freed from the likes of the USA, who persist in fighting out their political prejudices on other people's soil. The best contribution the West could make is to refrain from interference in the political affairs of that country and instead give aid to help them develop as they alone should determine.

My thanks to the NAW for giving me such a wonderful opportunity.



**ANAHITA  
RATEBZAD,  
DEPUTY  
HEAD OF  
STATE  
IN 1980**

## afghanistan timeline

**1878** Britain again attacks Afghanistan

**1880** War ends with treaty ceding control of Afghan foreign policy to Britain

**1917** Russian revolution

**1919** Britain at war with Afghanistan

**1919** Treaty of Rawalpindi ends Afghan War of Independence establishing border between the Emirate of Afghanistan and the British Raj

**1921** Afghanistan signs friendship treaty with Russia

**1929** Afghan monarch institutes limited modernisation programme

**1931** Kabul University is founded

**1933** Monarch is assassinated

**1950** Kabul University opens doors to women

**1953** Restrictions are lifted on burqa wearing in public

**1964** The Constitution gives the vote to all and set down the right of women to stand for public office etc

**1965** People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) formed

**1967** First trade unions in Afghanistan are formed

**1973** Monarchy deposed. Afghanistan becomes a republic

**1978** The PDPA comes to power and foreign-armed insurgency begins in southern provinces

**1978** Central Council of Afghan Trade Unions is established

**1979** The PDPA invites Soviet Union support against foreign attempts to destabilise the government

**1986** The US arms Mujaheddin opposition fighters with state-of-the-art Stinger missiles

**1987** Mohammad

Najibullah becomes president and attempts to initiate a national reconciliation process

**1989** Soviet military personnel leave Afghanistan

**1992** Government of PDPA is brought down by Islamist opposition backed by US, Britain, and allies. Islamic State of Afghanistan is declared.

**1992** The trade union confederation is closed down

**1994** Taliban come to forefront as a faction in Afghan civil war

**1996** Taliban seize power and impose Sharia law. Catastrophic era for women begins

**1996** Najibullah is taken from UN headquarters and executed

**1996** First Taliban government

**2001** Al-Qaeda attack on World Trade Centre, New York

**2001** US, Britain, and allies declare war on Afghanistan – bombardment then invasion

**2001** The Northern Alliance supported by US and Britain ousts the Taliban

**2003** US/NATO operation to ensure 'security' in Afghanistan. Mission 'completed' in 2014

**2010** Wikileaks – tens of thousands of top-secret military documents reveal the true nature of the US occupation, a catalogue of carnage

**2015** New US/NATO intervention – Resolute Support Mission – to 'help' the Afghan defence forces 'fight terrorism'

**2020** US signs deal with the Taliban on their reinstatement in government in Afghanistan

**2021** Taliban return to power and announce return to Sharia Law



**SOCIALIST WOMEN IN  
AFGHANISTAN, LATE 1970S**





NAW IS AFFILIATED TO CND AND SENT A DELEGATE TO THE AGM HELD LAST SEPTEMBER. PAM FLYNN REPORTS

## nuclear expansion and a new Cold War

2021 was an important year for the global struggle for peace, justice, and nuclear disarmament. The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons entered into force in January. This Treaty makes nuclear weapons illegal. Needless to say, it is not well known in the UK because the nuclear armed states have shunned it. In its insistence that nuclear deterrence is essential, the Johnson government is flying in the face of public opinion.

In March, the long-awaited 'integrated defence review' brought the nasty surprise of a decision to expand the UK nuclear arsenal by 40%! Global Britain was revealed as an imperialist-minded offensive to project force and might.

The proposed nuclear warhead increase has been mirrored by a change in the nuclear-use posture. The government has increased the number of scenarios in which it might consider using a nuclear weapon and ended transparency regarding its perspectives.

In May, this bellicose attack mentality was made reality, when HMS Queen Elizabeth set off for the Pacific. The aircraft carrier and its accompanying task force has since been sailing in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea provoking a concerned response from China.

This change in nuclear use question becomes fundamental when we see the so-called 'tilt' or 'pivot' towards the Indo-Pacific.

## AUKUS

Then, in September, the UK announced its new military alliance with the USA and Australia – AUKUS. This is a massively dangerous new Cold War, theoretically aimed at securing a "rules based international order". Jenny Clegg will write separately on this in our next issue.

In an emergency debate, delegates at



Labour Party conference soundly rejected this new agreement. We shall need to see what transpires with the leadership.

CND AGM agreed to make campaigning against AUKUS a priority for the immediate future.

## spy cops

The AGM noted the core participant status granted to CND in the Spy Cops enquiry into undercover policing in the 1980s and CND's commitment to campaign against the Policing Bill which is currently being debated in the House of Lords.

## afghanistan

In considering media coverage of the defeat of the US/NATO in Afghanistan we noted that anti-war voices were almost

totally excluded. We also noted the effect of war on women and girls worldwide and the important role of women in conflict resolution.

## summary

Last but not least CND continues to act on the climate emergency. COP 26 offered a significant opportunity to draw attention to carbon emissions and environmental degradation produced by the military. There was a significant peace bloc on the truly huge demonstration in Glasgow in November.

The AGM was productive and energising. We consolidated our links with peace builders across the world. NAW can be proud of its longstanding opposition to nuclear weapons, nuclear power and NATO.

# how you can help...

**E**VEN though the UK won't sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, cities and towns can. You can help by contacting your local councillors and ask them to move a resolution at their Council Meeting supporting the Treaty. Manchester City Council has already done this.

This makes a big difference to the international anti-nuclear movement, particularly ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons), who have worked so hard

to get the UN Treaty adopted. It also illustrates to other councils and Mayors up and down the UK and in other countries, that there are citizens out there supporting them. The hope is to put pressure on the UK government by creating a network of Nuclear Ban Communities.

<https://democracy.manchester.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?Id=166>  
Decision – Motion – International Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons (manchester.gov.uk)



# National Assembly of Women annual general meeting

**11am Saturday  
18 June at  
Unite's  
regional office,  
Birmingham**

***All members  
and affiliates'  
representatives  
welcome***

**Contact  
naw@sisters.org.uk  
for more info**

*continued from page 5*

those discussions are uncomfortable for our male colleagues and as a result tend to get pushed down the agenda, which is infuriating and quite honestly puts women off raising things or even joining the union in the first place.

We need to make sure that talking about the menopause isn't shied away from just as talking about Green issues isn't, that we are the people that our members can turn to if they are experiencing domestic violence and that we have our houses in order when it comes to sexual harassment.

Thanks to some brilliant female leaders we have in the labour movement as a whole, at all levels as well as you here in this room I think we have a massive opportunity to change our movement. I for one am really excited about that, it's not going to be easy, it's not going to happen overnight, we will definitely ruffle some feathers, but it can be done together by empowering our sisters throughout the labour movement, and making sure they have a voice that is heard, we need to work on removing the imposter syndrome so many of us have, I certainly suffer from it and that's why it's important to have a good support system in place because we deserve to be here, we work hard to get to the positions we are in, harder than our male counterparts because we have to break through the barrier of how it's always been and we shouldn't be made to feel like we have to apologise for it by anyone.

We need to continue to utilise the digital methods that have worked so well over the last 18 months to break barriers down and ensure we don't go backwards and end up preventing women and others from being involved again. Zoom, Teams and WhatsApp have to be part of our tool box going forwards, we are utilising them to have network meetings, bringing different groups of members together to talk about their issues so we can look to build campaigns and share best practice.

I'll finish by saying I'm in a very privileged position, standing here as a general secretary, I know that, I'm incredibly



proud of the fact I am. I've worked hard to get here. It's not been easy. I've questioned why I ever left Greggs many times, as I mentioned I am the first female general secretary the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union has ever had, I don't want to be the last, because you know what, if I can get here as a teenage mum from Wakefield who didn't get to university, didn't really know what she wanted to be when she grew up, an ex-Greggs' employee, anyone can and if I can do anything to help or support you please get in touch, because it's no good me being here alone and saying women have made it we need to lift each other up.

Thank you

## what's on...

**NAW Executive Committee** meetings are open to *all* members.

The next will be online at 10am on Saturday 12 February. 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)*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

phone \_\_\_\_\_

email \_\_\_\_\_

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