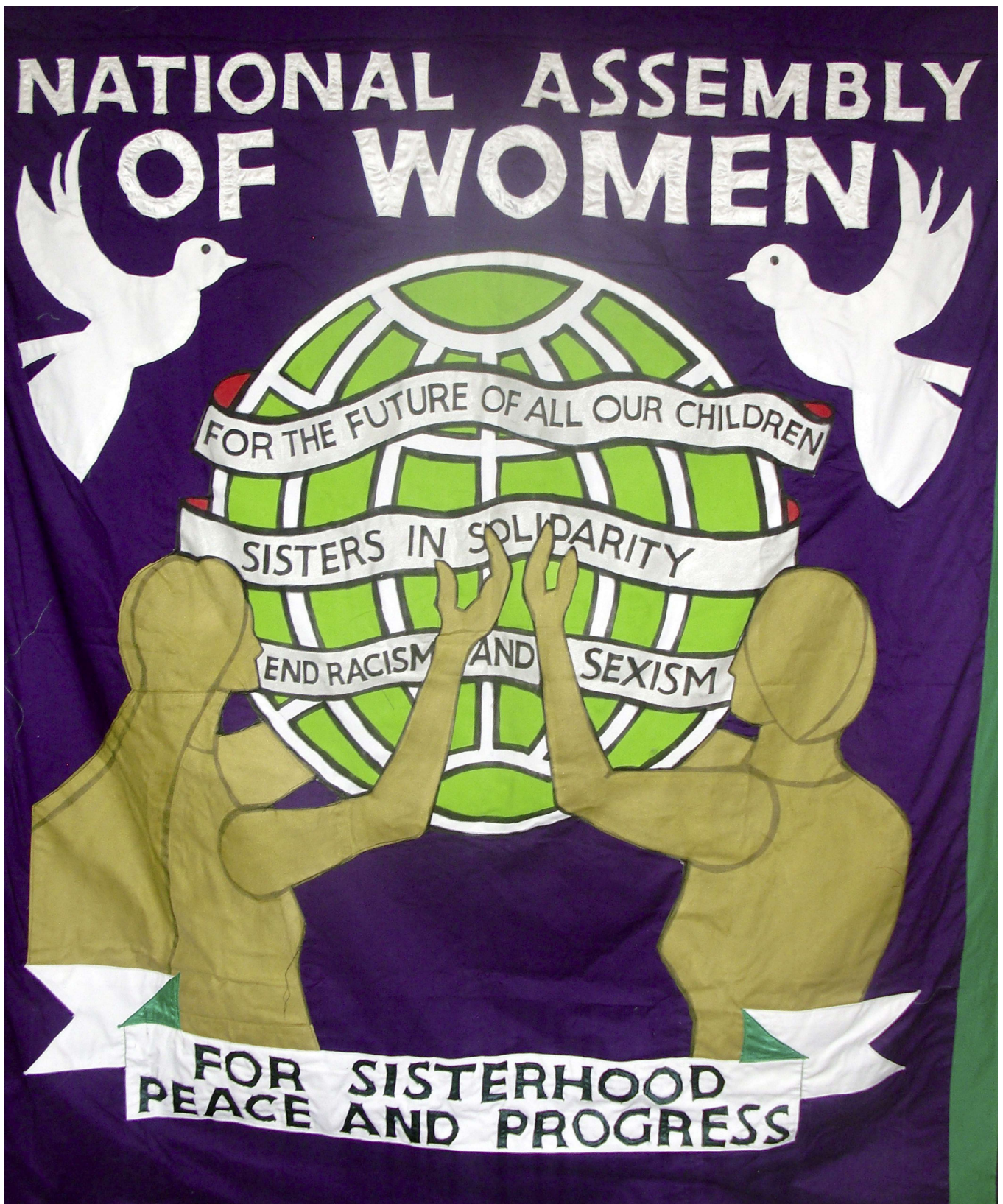


Sisters in Solidarity



A summary of the NAW's campaigning
years 2012 to 2022

Ten years ago, as part of its 60th anniversary celebrations, the National Assembly of Women published its history, researched and written by Norma Bramley, with information, reminiscences and photographs telling our organisation's story from its foundation meeting in St Pancras town hall on International Women's Day in 1952 up to 2012. The project reflected the NAW's belief that it is crucial that women, whose voices and influence are so often sidelined, can tell and celebrate the story of their struggle for equality, peace, and socialism, and be heard by working class women and men everywhere.

Copies of the inspirational account of our first 60 years have been in constant demand ever since and have gone to several reprints, the most recent of which was earlier this autumn. This short tract begins where Norma's work left off and tells the story of our work – our domestic and international campaigns; events we have organised and the projects we have supported – during the last 10 years.

Struggle against the brutal austerity measures of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition, aptly labelled 'ConDem', from 2010 and of the Conservative governments ever since the 2015 general election, have dominated our efforts on the domestic front. As the TUC and trade unions, left politicians, women's organisations and charities have been exposing throughout the decade, women and their families have been disproportionately hit by successive cuts to public sector provision and essential benefits, as well as by lack of affordable housing and totally underfunded and often inadequate and inaccessible childcare provision. In a Policy Briefing in March 2012, the Fawcett Society observed prophetically that:

“Over time, the impact of austerity will not only be calculated through the money in



Sisters Summer 2013 with TUC general secretary and NAW vice president Frances O'Grady, TUC president Lesley Mercer, and the maquette of the Sylvia Pankhurst statue

2014, Conway Hall in London. Hundreds of women attended the Women Against Austerity Conference. The NAW played a leading role in its organisation and our banner hangs from the balcony

women's pockets and their spending power relative to men's. It will result in a society in which women's voice and choices are diminished, where women's access to employment justice and safety are undermined and where women become more, rather than less, dependent on the state or their families for support.”

Throughout the decade swingeing cuts have deprived women of the facilities, services and support they so desperately needed, while the number of women trapped by domestic violence has increased significantly. Millions more children have been thrown into poverty. Those who live in families with a single parent, 90+% of whom are women, who live in large families and/or who are Black, are most vulnerable according to the Child Poverty Action Group. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, most people living in poverty were women. They were more likely than men to be in low paid or insecure employment and/or struggling with debt.

From 2020, the now combined and deeply penetrating effects of the deep global economic crisis, brutal austerity and the fatally mismanaged Covid-19 pandemic have had a devastating effect on women in every country. Women across the world have been disproportionately exposed to the virus through their paid and unpaid work. Many have been left physically and mentally injured. Large numbers of women have lost their livelihoods. They have been cast into grinding poverty, losing what vestiges of independence they had. Millions have been trapped in situations of horrific domestic violence and it has seemed that the clock has been turning back on our long-fought-for gains on every front. In Britain, women shared the above experience. The overwhelming burden of care at work and at





An early Charter for Women conference with Barbara Switzer, Eleanor Lewington and Terry Marsland in the front row. All were former officers of the NAW – respectively president, treasurer, president

home during lockdowns fell on women with devastating consequences for their capacity to stay safe and financially independent. In the year ending in March 2021, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline recorded a 22% increase in calls by comparison with the year to March 2020.

But the NAW has not only exposed the devastating impact of austerity measures and the pandemic on women. We have consistently argued that things do not have to be this way and, most importantly, promoted how change can be won.

Central to our struggle for change has been the Charter for Women – a crucial campaigning document since its presentation to the TUC Women’s Conference in 2003. The NAW supported the original launch and was a founding signatory and affiliate. Adopted by many national trade unions, its promotion was overseen by the Charter for Women Steering Committee, which included its author and architect, NAW member, Professor Mary Davis.

The Charter Steering Committee organised a number of very successful national annual conferences, supported by the NAW. However, to give the Charter new momentum, the Steering Committee recommended to its affiliates that custodianship be transferred to the NAW, on the understanding that it would embrace the Charter’s demands and place them at the heart of its campaigning. This was agreed unanimously by affiliates and the transfer was agreed at the NAW’s 2016 AGM, after which we asked Mary to update and refresh the document, while retaining its division into three campaigning sections setting out demands for women in society, at work and in the labour movement. The NAW highlights what is said in the Charter’s preamble which speaks of the imperative of motivating a new generation of women activists and revitalising the fight for women’s liberation. The Charter

offers a way to achieve this is by uniting women around a campaigning programme

Following in the steps of our sisters since the foundation of the NAW, we have continued to place our struggle for lasting peace, free from wars and militarism at the heart of what we do. We recognised that all peace-loving women and men in Britain bear a unique responsibility for challenging our government, one of the foremost imperialist powers in the world. It bears responsibility – as a key ally of the US, a leading member of NATO and promoter of a £multi-billion profit hungry military-industrial sector – for the perpetuation of cold and hot wars around the world and recklessly drawing us ever closer to the brink of catastrophe. The devastating war in Ukraine must be ended immediately in a negotiated settlement which includes support for the women and their families who have lost their loved ones, homes, livelihoods, and voices and who have been exposed to untold violence.

We have continued to call for the scrapping of the Trident nuclear project and an end to all weapons of mass destruction – their research and development, production, deployment, and storage. We condemn the use or threat to use these weapons by any government. We hold that the billions being spent on Trident should be used to invest in a socially productive, peaceful economy.

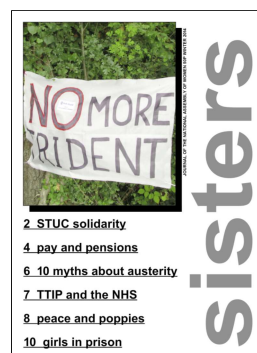
The NAW is working in and with CND, Stop the War and the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) and would like to acknowledge in particular the steadfast and invaluable contribution on peace within the NAW and in the wider peace movement of activists, Pam Flynn and Lydia Meryll, including their support in the shaping of NAW’s policy.

In November 2012 we organised a conference at trade union Unison’s headquarters in central London, “Women, Power and Politics: Sisters fight back.” This was addressed by Sarah Veale, then head of the TUC’s Equalities and Employment Department; Gloria Mills, Unison’s director of equalities and vice-president of the NAW, Barbara White (Musicians’ Union), Megan Dobney (SERTUC), and Carolyn Simpson (Unite). Their inspiring input, calling for every woman in every workplace to stand and fight together against the government’s vicious attack on women, as well as the discussion in workshops on the attack on women’s wages and the centrality of the campaign for equal pay, fed directly into the NAW’s strategy going forward.

In February 2013 the NAW was one of the signatory organisations to a letter published by



above and below: Sisters covers from 2014





NAW stall at the 2017 TUC Women's Conference

from the left: Barbara Switzer, Anita Wright, Jo Stevenson

The Guardian calling for the convening of a People's Assembly Against Austerity. The Assembly first met on 22 June 2013 with over 3,000 people packed into Central Hall Westminster. NAW secretary, Anita Wright spoke in the session headed "At the sharp end", together with the general secretary of the PCS union, disability campaigners and black activists. The NAW has continued to support the People's Assembly promoting its campaigns and speaking on its national and local platforms at rallies and demonstrations.

The TUC Women's Conference held a landmark meeting in March 2013, addressed by Frances O'Grady newly appointed in January that year as first woman general secretary of the TUC. In that forum the disastrous impact of the government's austerity measures were spelt out graphically by both Frances and every woman who got up to speak.

Frances O'Grady was invited to become one of our vice-presidents and the NAW is honoured that she accepted and grateful that she has given us invaluable support from our May 2013 AGM, when her position was ratified, down to the present. Frances retires from her TUC role at the end of this year. Thank you, Frances, and congratulations on all you have done for women, their fight against austerity and for their jobs, conditions, and rights, during your time in office.

Having pledged ourselves at the same May 2013 AGM to renewed high-profile campaigning efforts, we played a leading role in organising the Women Against Austerity Conference in Conway Hall in February 2014, together with other sister organisations and individuals who had signed the original call for the People's Assembly against Austerity. The event brought together 250 women from across the labour and progressive movement,

determined that their input would play a major role in identifying the impact of Coalition cuts on themselves and their families, shaping the fight against austerity going forward, articulating policies for an alternative future in which their needs were both identified and taken fully into account, and working for lasting peace, without which all our aspirations will be unobtainable. The opening and closing sessions were chaired by the NAW's president, Dona Feltham and secretary, Anita Wright respectively and speakers included Sarah Veale (TUC), Gloria Mills (Unison), Kate Hudson (CND) and Lindsay German (Stop the War). It was a truly inspiring day!

The NAW brought a new work plan to the 2015 AGM emphasising building the organisation and its profile in the labour movement and including a commitment to hold a high-profile seminar each year. The first such event, "What now for women?" took place at Wortley Hall on 17 and 18 October in conjunction with the Raymond Williams Foundation. Our first keynote speaker was Vera Polycarpou, political advisor to the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group of MEPs in the European Parliament. She gave us a penetrating insight into the way in which women's equality issues could and were being raised by the GUE/NGL group and the importance of that work in a climate in which women's rights were under attack. Siobhan Endean, head of equalities at Unite demonstrated the imperative of women being at the table both in the the debate on the alternative to austerity and in all decision-making forums.

This seminar provided us with a perfect setting in which to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Women's International Democratic Foundation in 1945, which we did at a celebratory evening meal with Barbara Switzer as our after-dinner speaker.

When we gathered at Wortley Hall in November 2016 for our second national seminar, "An economy that delivers for women", we invited Faiza Shaheen, director of the Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS) to open. She stressed that an inclusive economy and a genuine commitment to end discrimination were essential to the creation of a more equal society.

For our weekend seminar at Wortley Hall in September 2018, we chose to explore two themes. Sharon Graham of Unite spoke on "Women and the future of work", helping us to understand the potential impact of robotics, artificial intelligence, and automation on



Sisters in 2016 celebrating International Workers' Day

women's jobs and working life and how to prepare so that women were not left behind in the fast-changing environment. Kiri Tunks, president of the NUT section of the new National Education Union and co-founder of Women's Place UK, took up the linked theme of "Valuing women and girls in the workplace and wider society".

The NAW's autumn seminar in 2019, held at the NASUWT conference centre in Rednal, Birmingham was devoted to the relaunch of the Charter for Women, looking in detail at its demands and how to use it for the rebuilding of the women's movement in Britain. Key contributions were made by the Charter's author, Mary Davis, Ruth Serwotka of Women's Place UK, Joy Johnson and Lisa Eldred. The coming of the pandemic inevitably impacted on the NAW's work to campaign on the Charter but we are determined to take this up with renewed vigour going forward.

Covid prevented us from having a 'live' autumn gathering in 2020 and we very much missed it, but we were able to come together once again in Rednal in October 2021 for a hugely successful meeting focussing on the changing world of work. Sian Elliott, senior policy officer at the TUC spoke on the essential role of women during the pandemic and drawing attention to their poverty. "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 told us. Sarah Woolley, general secretary of the Bakers Food and Allied Workers' Union concentrated on the positive impact women's participation has in the labour movement. Fran Heathcote, PCS president, forecast the impending cost of living crisis caused, not by workers but by low wages, pay



Speakers at the 2018 NAW seminar: top Sharon Graham and below Kiri Tunks

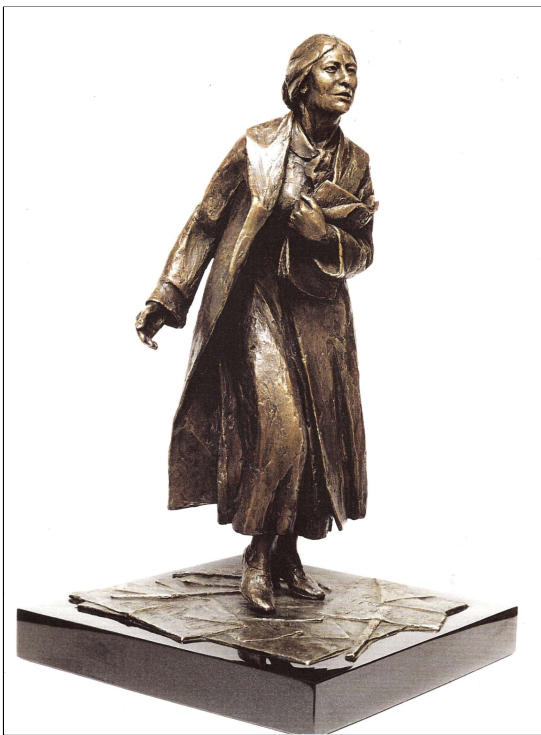
Some of the delegates at the fabulous 2021 NAW seminar at the NASUWT's education centre near Birmingham

freezes, precarious work, zero hours contracts and fire and rehire, by the government's attack on pensions and its agenda of privatisation and assault on public services. All this, she said, impacts disproportionately on women and "we need to support and organise these women and defend them from attack". She highlighted the importance of events such as this in giving women "the opportunity to really discuss the the challenges we face as women, in the context of the political and economic situation we are in".

Our 2015 work plan commitment to raising our profile, especially in the trade union and progressive movement, has seen the NAW speak at many national, regional and local events, meetings, and demonstrations across the country. It is not possible to name them all here, but they are recorded in our annual reports, available on our website. As well as contributions mentioned elsewhere, they have included the Green Gathering of Wales, the Chain Makers' Festival in Cradley, the Derby Silk Mills Festival, SERTUC Women's Rights Conferences, a National Pensioners' Convention women's seminar, the relaunch of the British Peace Assembly, a Reclaim the Night rally in Exeter, regional TUC meetings, *Morning Star* events, trades council meetings and a variety of Unite and Unison regional and local events. We have also regularly taken our stall, exhibition, campaign materials and merchandise to the TUC Women's Conference and many other trade union events. We will be present throughout Unite's National Equalities Conference 2022 in Bournemouth in October.

Raising our profile has made us give careful consideration to the accessibility of our meetings and we have held AGMs, seminars





The NAW is a founding sponsor of the campaign to raise a statue of Sylvia Pankhurst. We are delighted that progress is now being made to place the statue on Clerkenwell Green in Islington, London. The Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee is waiting to have its application for planning permission to be part of the Council's refurbishment of the Green approved and we look forward to a wonderful launch event!

campaigning unstintingly against sexism and racism and played a pivotal role in securing the vote for every working-class woman in Britain.

With almost 35 years of relentless work to promote the project, raise the necessary money, and overcome all manner of legal and political setbacks, the end is hopefully in sight, and it will not be long before Sylvia will stand in the refurbished historic Clerkenwell Green, as agreed with Islington Council in 2015. The Green was the gathering place of workers in the 19th century and the point from which the first mass May Day march set out for central London in 1890. A recent post on the Facebook page dedicated to the project read: "Just met with Islington Council to discuss construction work around Clerkenwell Green where the statue will be sited. All looking good!" (14 July 2022)

www.facebook.com/astatueforsylvia.

Clerkenwell Green is adjacent to the Marx Memorial Library in which, in August 2016, the maquette of Sylvia's statue, designed by sculptor Ian Walters, was unveiled in the Reading Room. The campaign's website is www.gn.apc.org/sylviapankhurst. The statue will be an enduring reminder of Sylvia and all she stood for.

An important way of promoting the campaign for Sylvia's statue has been through the annual Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lectures, which the NAW has sponsored. The most recent, in August 2022, was given by Sylvia's biographer, Rachel Holmes, author of *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel*, who chose the theme 'Sylvia Pankhurst on War'. The fascinating (and otherwise sidelined) subjects of lectures in recent years have included 'Sylvia Pankhurst: women, race and class – then and now' (Mary Davis, 2021); 'Deeds not Words: changes in women's lives since 1918' (Helen Pankhurst, 2018); 'Socialism, Feminism and the Women of 1916' (Ruth Taillon, 2016) and 'The Militant Suffragette as a Militant Artist' (Hester Reeve, 2014).

Our international work has been prominent throughout the decade. The National Assembly of Women is proud to belong to the global sisterhood of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), and to struggle in solidarity with women's organisations worldwide in pursuance of our shared goals of equality and justice for women and children and for a future of peace and socialism, without which no lasting justice and equality can be built.

These goals are reflected in our active support for the progressive campaigns to which we are

and meetings in Liverpool and Birmingham, as well as in London and Wortley Hall.

The NAW has continued its connection with Wortley Hall, the 'Workers' Stately Home', near Sheffield. With its residents' garden room lounge dedicated to the National Assembly of Women and so much shared history, Wortley has been a place to which we have regularly returned to hold weekend gatherings and support the annual South Yorkshire Festival and Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial lecture every summer. The final event in our 60th anniversary celebrations was at the South Yorkshire Festival in July 2013, the event in 2012 having been cancelled due to atrocious weather! The NAW organised a high-profile all-women panel of speakers, including Skevi Koukouma, Women's International Democratic Federation vice president (Europe); Siobhan Endean, Unite Equalities Officer; Leslie Mercer, general secretary of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and Donna Feltham, NAW's president. It was especially good to return to the South Yorkshire Festival this year, after the pandemic gap, and the NAW's stall provided a great networking focus and did a lively trade helping to raise funds for the organisation.

The NAW has been, since 1988, a founding sponsor of the campaign to have a statue of Sylvia Pankhurst erected in London, with four of our members taking the lead through the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee – Barbara Switzer, Mary Davis, Megan Dobney and Philippa Clark. Sylvia, largely ignored in mainstream histories because of her devotion to socialism, internationalism, and peace,



Sisters Autumn 2020: claiming the post-Covid future for women

Sisters 2014: for toys to be toys, not "girl's toys" or "boy's toys"



affiliated, many of which have a focus on international solidarity and the struggle for peace. As well as the peace campaigns already mentioned, these include the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT), the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. We take great pride in the close links we have built with progressive women's organisations which have a branch or 'office' in Britain, including the Iraqi Women's League, the Democratic Organisation of Iranian Women, the Organisation of Sudanese Women (UK), and Nari Diganta, and with the European affiliates of the WIDF, including those of Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Turkey, and Portugal.

As an affiliate of the WIDF, we participate actively in its work as a member of both its World Committee and European regional body. Teleconferencing during Covid has enabled WIDF affiliates more easily to provide mutual encouragement and exchange news and analysis of the situation of women in our respective

Former NAW executive committee member Sheila Abdullah (left) on a demonstration in support of the Palestinian people



countries and exchange news on our key campaigns for equality and justice. They have also allowed us to meet regularly with the WIDF's vice presidents, Skevi Koukouma from Cyprus and Ada Donno from Italy, and our dedicated regional organising team in Greece, coordinated by Mairini Stefanides.

The WIDF World Congress takes place every four years. In 2012 our president, Dona Feltham, together with Janette Ferguson and Barbara Switzer went to the 15th Congress in Brazil in 2012 and Dona and Anita Wright represented the NAW at the follow-up meeting in Cyprus in April 2013. Dona attended the WIDF Steering Committee in Moscow in April 2014 which met to prepare for the WIDF's 70th anniversary in 2015. NAW president Anita Wright attended the European WIDF's seminar on women and healthcare in Brussels in early 2015 and presented a paper on the impact of cuts and privatisation to the NHS and women's health in Britain. Barbara Switzer represented the NAW at the event to mark the 70th anniversary of the victory over fascism organised by Russian Federation WIDF affiliate, the All Russian Women's Union.



left On the right of the picture, former NAW president Barbara Switzer in Moscow in 2015, representing the NAW at an event organised by WIDF affiliate the Russian Federation of Women, to celebrate the defeat of fascism in world war two

below Delegates at the WIDF Steering Committee meeting in 2013 in Cyprus. NAW secretary Anita Wright and president Dona Feltham are in the front row



Anita Wright and secretary, Liz Payne, represented the NAW at the 16th Congress of the WIDF in Bogota in 2016, themed "Women united for peace and the struggle against imperialism." The peace process in Colombia had reached a crucial stage that Autumn and the WIDF participated in a march and rally in the centre of the capital to show their solidarity with the women and people of Colombia in achieving this goal. The 17th Congress was delayed due to the pandemic but took place in Caracas in April 2022. Although we were not able to send delegates to Venezuela due to foreign office advice against 'all but essential travel', we took part in pre meetings and preparation of Congress documents.

Every year in March, we have attended and brought our NAW greetings to the international meeting to mark International Women's Day held at venues in London pre-



above *Sisters* 2019 and below *Sisters* 2022



right NAW Executive Committee member Bernadette Keaveney represented us and spoke at the 2022 London May Day Rally

pandemic and online in 2021 and 2022. This has meant that we have been able to mark this very special occasion with women and their families from Bangladesh, Chile, Cyprus, Greece, Guyana, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Spain, and Sudan, as well as from Britain, who make interventions on the women's struggle in their countries and contribute to a cultural programme of music, song, dance, and poetry.

A particularly valuable contribution to the progressive movement in Britain during the past 10 years has been the NAW's analysis of international issues as they affect women and women's struggle – in Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, and Sudan – reflected in our policy motions, statements, articles and at our meetings and seminars.

We have also responded to several major consultations, bringing the NAW's perspective and experience to bear on issues being researched by leading governmental and international bodies. Most recently, in 2020, we made a submission to the Women and Equality



Select Committee on Covid-19 and provided detailed input on the situation in Britain to the UN Special Rapporteur on women and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. You can read these in full in the *Documents* section of our website.

No account of the last decade of struggle would be complete without paying tribute to our magazine *Sisters* and the tireless efforts of the editorial and production team, Megan Dobney and Anita Wright, who have brought it out so regularly, often against the odds. It has carried articles from women trade union leaders and activists, women's campaigners and left and progressive politicians. Features exploring the economic, political, social and cultural aspects of the domestic and international environments

and their impact on women have been explored. The lives and work of individual women have been celebrated and, most importantly, *Sisters* has provided the background to and promoted our campaigns – on peace, equal pay, women's pensions, social care, women's reproductive rights, affordable quality childcare and children's rights, free and accessible public services providing for women's needs, against domestic and societal violence against women and for justice in every aspect of our lives.

It is not possible in the short space available to do justice to the breadth and depth of NAW's campaigns but the headings of some of the motions brought to our AGMs in the past four years give a flavour of our concerns and activities. Our last AGM, held in 2020, carried single motion on Women and Covid. Motions brought to the 2018 and 2019 AGMs included the climate emergency, child poverty, gambling, women's health and safety, women's rights in Iran, women and the struggle for civilian rule in Sudan, support of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the far right and the threat to peace and promoting defence diversification.

The generous legacy of £5,000 bequeathed by our sister Val Duncan who died in 2011, a former secretary of the NAW and lifelong campaigner for women's rights, peace, and socialism, has enabled the NAW to establish the Val Duncan Fund and subsidise its annual seminars, ensuring that costs do not prohibit women from participating in educational events. Our Diamond Appeal, launched ahead of our 60th anniversary, also raised £6,140, putting our work on a very sound financial footing as we moved into our seventh decade. We will need to raise new funds going forward so that we enjoy similar success in our eight decade!

As this short account goes to print, the NAW is looking forward to celebrating its 70th anniversary with an event at the Marx Memorial Library on 5 November at which we will be joined by two of our vice presidents, Dame Vera Baird and Gloria Mills. They will help us to reflect on positive outcomes for women during those 70 years, lessons learned and, most importantly, challenges for the future and how to build a strong united women's movement to overcome all difficulties as we work together for a just and equal society.



This history has been written by Liz Payne to whom the Executive Committee extends its sincere thanks.