

national assembly of women: conference report

women, power and politics: sisters fight back



In November 2012 during our 60th Anniversary Year the National Assembly of Women organised a conference hosted by the public sector union Unison at their Head Office. It was supported by various trade unions both large and small. In addition to trade union activists and officials the conference brought together women from around the country from many walks of life. This was an opportunity for women to gain a deeper understanding of this unelected male dominated Coalition Government's economic strategy, their agenda of disproportionate attacks on women wrapped up in the name of austerity, and how these policies impact on women.

Although this document is a summary of the conference, the National Assembly of Women would like to see it used as a tool to assist women in the debate on what kind of alternative economic, social and political policies we need in order to develop a fairer, just and more equal society.

The National Assembly of Women will be using this document at our 2013 AGM to develop future strategy on joining together as women to make our voices heard. The conference was the first step on building the fight back.

Yours in Sisterhood

Dona Feltham

NAW President

sisters special

every woman in every workplace stronger together

Sarah Veale from the Trades Union Congress made it clear that we face the worst attacks in a generation. With women being twice as likely to be affected by government cuts as men she identified the key areas that disproportionately affect us:

■ Women's unemployment now stands at 1.10 million, the highest for a quarter of a century. Most of these women were made redundant following the vicious cuts to the public sector, where women make up 64% of the workforce and more in areas like local government (77%) and the NHS (75%) and those still in work face another year of a pay freeze.

■ The government was determined to cut 28% central funding to local authorities over four years. Councils have already seen a 9.9% reduction in 2011/12 and now face a 7.3% cut 2012/13. As the main users of local services, women have had to bear the brunt of cuts to libraries, children's centres and other voluntary and community based services including those provided by women's aid.

■ The government's eight year austerity plan to reduce welfare spending by £27 million has so far seen cuts of £14.9 billion and hit the poorest the hardest. The poorest 20% have seen a 1.5% drop in their income while the richest 10% would see a drop of 0.5%. With plans for further changes to the benefit system this will impact even further on the unemployed, disabled workers, and low-paid workers with children.

■ Changes to the state pension age have disadvantaged half a million women and the recent proposal to bring in a flat rate single pension of £144 in today's money in 2017 will leave thousands of older

woman desperately trying to make up their National Insurance contributions in time in order to receive the full pension.

■ Hard won abortion rights are at risk from within parliament, with attempts to change the legal limit for an abortion, as well as pressure from fundamental religious group who are trying to create a climate of opposition to a woman's right to choose.

■ Reducing maternity leave to 18 weeks and cutting maternity allowances at a time when childcare costs have risen (6% since November 2012) is a deliberate attempt to keep women in the home and in poverty. Recent research commissioned by Findababysitter.com showed that 25% of unemployed women would prefer to work but could not afford the cost of childcare; this rose to 40% in London. Currently 3.6 million children are living in poverty, and with predictions that this will rise significantly as a result of changes to the welfare system it is clear that another generation will be blighted by this government.

■ Women are being subjected to ever increasing violence both here and abroad. Higher unemployment brings with it a rise in the number of incidents of domestic violence and half the women seeking asylum have experienced rape, with two-thirds having faced gender persecution. At the same time many refuges for victims of violence are closing because they are losing their funding.

■ Cuts to legal aid and changes to industrial tribunals under the guise of doing away with "red-tape" are undermining free and equal access to justice and fairness in the UK. The government's attack on the Equality Act and funding cuts and disabling reforms proposed for the European Court of Human Rights leaves it toothless.

Three priorities for action:

1. We must set out an alternative to austerity based on economic growth, jobs and tax justice. Only through building a fairer, stronger economy that includes providing decent work for all will we be able to deal with our debts in the long term. The TUC has made a strong case for this strategy and the mas-



sive demonstrations in 2012 showed that millions of people support this policy.

2. We must continue to fight the cuts in our workplaces and our communities working to unite women in unions, local campaigns and charities and reach out to those millions of people, young and old, black and white, employed and unemployed to create a better and more hopeful vision for Britain's future.

3. We must get organised – and there is no substitute for effective trade union organisation in the fight against the government's policy of austerity. We must recruit workers into trade unions and encourage them to get active and rebuild collective strength. With union density higher among women than men it our duty to show the way.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
[HTTP://WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/](http://www.tuc.org.uk/)
[HTTP://FALSEECONOMY.ORG.UK/](http://falseeconomy.org.uk/)

women and the struggle for a progressive, socialist alternative

Gloria Mills, Director of Unison's Equal Opportunities Department said it was not enough for women to stand on the sidelines and simply influence policies. Our voices must be central to the fight back against the neo-liberal policies developed in the 1980s which were designed to weaken the trade union movement and ensure power stays in the hand of banks and big business. She outlined the basis of this attack:

■ Politicians across Europe are using the current crisis to restructure the state, particularly the welfare state. This is shifting power from elected government to the private sector. This started in the 1970s when Margaret Thatcher's government forced through Compulsory Competitive Tendering and sold off the profitable sections of British Aerospace and Cable & Wireless. By the 1980s and in its third term, the Tory government forged ahead and privatised British Gas, Rail, and most public utilities. New Labour continued the privatisation agenda, but recognising the unpopularity of the policy compromised by using Public Finance Initiative to link business with public sector projects. Cameron's government is now aggressively pushing the privatisation agenda forward in the NHS, police and prison service.

■ The IMF, European Central Bank and European Commission are now established as a Troika that is capable of putting bankers in charge of countries to implement austerity policies in exchange for financial bailouts and driving ordinary people into poverty. Oxfam's latest report has shown that the gap between rich and poor is widening and they estimate that the \$240 billion in net income

earned in 2012 by the richest 100 billionaires would be enough to make extreme poverty history four times over.

■ In Britain, these policies have resulted in over 250,000 jobs being lost in the last two years in the public sector, with a further 10,000 to go by 2016. With women making up 64% of the public sector workforce it is forcing up female unemployment to a 25 year high.

■ Public sector pay has been frozen resulting in a 15% cut in real terms and new cartels are being developed to break national pay and conditions in the NHS Trusts. As a result, trade unions have to spend more time in small negotiations and it risks losing sight of the bigger political picture.

■ 57% of public sector workers are part-time, many of whom are women with children and as benefit cuts bite this will condemn 70,000 children to live in poverty.

■ The voluntary sector is facing £3 billion cuts between 2011-2015. As a result of these cuts, many are being forced to re-employ staff on worse pay and conditions. It also means the vital services like refuges for women experiencing domestic violence are seriously reduced.

■ Energy companies have seen huge profits, yet continue to raise prices to subsidise shareholders dividends. For example Southern Electric made a £398 million half year profit in November 2012 and gave its shareholders a 5% dividend increase at the same time as raising costs to consumers by 9%.

Priorities for action:

1. We must campaign for a living wage. Research in December 2012



by the Resolution Foundation and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) claimed that by paying staff at least £7.45 per hour outside London, and £8.55 within the capital, it would boost the nationwide income by £6.5bn a year and the government would collect more income tax and pay out less in benefits and tax credits.

2. We have to campaign for legislation to close tax loopholes, introduce a financial transaction tax and demand a windfall tax on companies that report huge profits to fund the development of the National Health Service and the welfare state.

3. Above all, women must engage with the debate on a progressive, socialist alternative and support the National Assembly of Women in articulating this vision.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

[HTTP://WWW.UNISON.ORG.UK/](http://www.unison.org.uk/)

[HTTP://WWW.CPAG.ORG.UK/](http://www.cpag.org.uk/)

[HTTP://WWW.JRF.ORG.UK/](http://www.jrf.org.uk/)

[HTTP://VOLUNTARYSECTORCUTS.ORG.UK/ABOUT/](http://voluntarysectorcuts.org.uk/about/)



the attack on wages and the campaign for equal pay

The coalition government is determined to push wages down by freezing public sector pay, cutting in-work benefits and attempting to introduce regional pay. **Megan Dobney**, TUC Secretary for London, South East and Eastern Region, and NAW Executive Committee member, opened the discussion by looking at the relationship between wages and economic growth followed by **Carolyn Simpson**, Chair of the SERTUC Women's Rights Committee who outlined the struggle for equal pay.

■ The nation's wealth is measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and this is the sum of the value of all goods and services produced by workers. The proportion of the nation's wealth going to wages has fallen from 64.5% in 1975 to 53.5% in 2007 and is still falling. Within this figure, the higher earners are taking a bigger proportion than those at the bottom of the pay scales. This is not a UK phenomenon; it is the outcome of global capitalist policies.

■ Parallel to this policy we have seen in Britain:

■ Economic restructuring through privatisation, eroding trade union powers and growth in power of financial institutions.

■ Weakening of state safety nets by lowering the value of benefits and reducing pensions.

■ Upward concentration of power from Town Halls to boardrooms, growing tax avoidance, decline in manufacturing from 33.5% of GDP to 13%, and world investment not world trade.

■ Public sector wages create local wealth as shown in the TUC publication *Speaking Up for Public Services*. The average wage of a public sector worker is £25k and 53p of each of their pounds is spent locally. A further 31p in every pound spent is re-spent by local

suppliers in the local economy. So for every pound spent 64p is reinvested in the local economy. The result of job cuts and low wages can be seen reflected in the empty shops in most high streets.

■ Forty years after the Equal Pay Act women still on average earn 14.9% less per hour than men and this figure has remained virtually unchanged despite demands for big employers to undertake equal pay reviews. This figure rises to 23% in London.

■ The pay gap is wider in the private sector than in the public sector (20.4% compared to 13.2%). With the reduction in public sector jobs the pay gap is likely to widen. For every £100 a man takes home, a woman will take home £85.

■ The attempts to introduce regional pay will impact even more on women, particularly in areas of greatest deprivation which could suffer the biggest changes to wages. As women spend more in their local area this will also have a detrimental effect on local economies.

What is to be done?

1. We need to strengthen our understanding of capitalist economics in order to rebuff the government's argument about the deficit and debt. Trade union activists are very skilled in negotiating, understanding legislation and organising workers but we have neglected our political education.

2. We need to ensure that the campaign for equal pay is seen as integral to this struggle and not a diversion from the fight for jobs and better wages.

3. We must develop a structured fight back against the Great Pay Robbery for fairness and for economic growth.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

[HTTP://SERTUCRESOURCES.WORDPRESS.COM](http://sertucresources.wordpress.com)

[HTTP://WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/TUCFILES/373/THEGREATWAGESGRAB.PDF](http://www.tuc.org.uk/tucfiles/373/thegreatwagesgrab.pdf)

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[HTTP://WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/EXTRAS/SPEAKINGUPFORPUBLICSERVICES.PDF](http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/speakingupforpublicservices.pdf)

[HTTP://WWW.FAWCETTSOCIETY.ORG.UK/INDEX.ASP?PAGEID=1273](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?pageid=1273)

peace and the arms industry – securing the future

At a time of vicious cuts to the public sector and austerity measures hitting millions of people, the government is promoting the arms trade as a way of delivering more jobs. Over 300,000 people currently work in the arms industry in Britain, with many more employed in smaller companies according to the pro-arms industry website Defence Matters. These workers possess valuable skills but could those skills be put to far better use?

This issue, the human cost, nuclear power and renewable energy were explored in the workshop led by **Anne-Marie O'Reilly** from the Campaign Against Arms Trade and CND Executive Committee Member, **Lydia Meryll**.

■ Arms sales account for over £50 billion each year. The main producers are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UK, USA, Russia, China and France) plus Germany and Italy and most of the weapons are bought by developing countries.

■ The global cost of corruption in the arms trade stands at £12.6b per year, the same figure as the G8 pledged to fight hunger in 2009, and the countries at greatest risk of corruption are those that Britain does most trade with – Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Oman.

■ In 2011 the British Government spent 30 times more on arms Research and Development than it did on renewable energy Research and Development. The energy and environmental market has the potential to expand and features high-tech manufacturing and engineering skills sets as arms production. Arms jobs are subsidised through taxation so resources could be redirected to develop secure jobs and green technology.

■ The connection between the nuclear power industry and nuclear weapons cannot be dismissed. It is

conveniently used to condemn countries like Iran, but ignored when doing deals with EDF to build nuclear power plants in Britain. Over-reliance on nuclear power creates long term problems with radioactive waste and risks the future security of our country.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
[HTTP://WWW.CAAT.ORG.UK/](http://www.caat.org.uk/)
[HTTP://WWW.CNDUK.ORG/](http://www.cnduk.org/)

women in society, children and the family

The American journal *Business Week* published a report in 1995 entitled *Capitalism Destroys the Family*. It noted that the average wage had dropped by 20% since 1972 and as a result it takes more than one wage to enable the average American family to live above the poverty level. It had to admit that families were cracking under the strain of a failed economic and social system. **Anita Wright**, National Assembly of Women Secretary and **Dr Ute Navidi**, former Chief Executive of children's charity London Play led a discussion on how the family has been moulded by capitalism and the impact of government policies on family life.

■ Throughout history, the family has evolved to reflect the economic basis of society. The development of the monogamous marriage with the supremacy of the man, and the need to produce children of uncontested paternity emerged alongside property rights and as a rule only the man could dissolve the marriage. All this was to ensure that the father's property only passed on to his natural heirs. From this point on the relationship between the sexes became codified and laws and customs prescribed behaviour between men and women.

■ Politicians of all parties have struggled to articulate a coherent policy on the family. The New Labour government's family policy agenda was based on parenting being the key to developing indi-



vidual responsibility in the community. The coalition government has continued with this theme albeit with reduced spending on agencies to deliver the policy.

■ This is also reflected in the dropping the reference to children and families in the title of the now Department for Education and placing its remit in the Department for Communities and Local Government.

■ As well as the economic imperative, there is a moral and ideological agenda underpinning the seemingly disjointed initiatives of the Cameron government. Family breakdown costs £44 billion each year and 48% of children will see the breakdown of their parents' relationship. There is a rise in the number of couples cohabiting and among new parents on low incomes only 50% are married. This rises to 80% for couples on £21k to £31k. The government solution is to recognise marriage in the tax and benefit system.

■ Changes to maternity leave, grants and child benefit have hit low paid and single parents hardest and reinforces the notion that women should only have children if they are married and can afford it.

■ The closure of Sure Start Nurseries and high childcare costs resulted in many women being unable to work even if they want to. It reinforces gender stereotypes and resurrects the notion of a single family wage.

■ The fragmentation of the state education system through the introduction of Free Schools and Academies is exacerbating class divisions and inhibiting social mobility.

What is needed to support the family

1. A comprehensive childcare strategy that delivers high quality, affordable and local child care provision.
2. Job security for all women during pregnancy and maternity, maternity and parental leave that promotes real equality and services to support a safe and healthy pregnancy.
3. Parenthood recognised in the equality legislation to ensure that

breaks in employment do not adversely affect mothers or fathers.

4. Child benefit freeze to be lifted and rates restored, tax on child benefit to be stopped and changes to working tax credit to be halted.

5. Access to local state schools that are fully comprehensive, well funded and democratically accountable.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
[HTTP://WWW.CPAG.ORG.UK/](http://www.cpag.org.uk/)
[HTTP://WWW.DAYCARETRUST.ORG.UK/](http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/)
[HTTP://WWW.UKCHILDCARE.CA/POLICY/STRATEGY.SHTML](http://www.ukchildcare.ca/policy/strategy.shtml)

representation of women in government and the trade unions

Women are still under-represented in positions of power and influence in public life. This limits our ability to make our voices heard and influence economic and social policy. **Barbara White**, Musicians Union Executive Committee member and Labour Councillor, and **Jane Stewart**, Unite Executive Committee member and TUC General Council member opened the discussion on why there are not more women in positions of leadership.

■ Women are responsible for approximately 70% of household spending power and make up nearly half the economically active workforce, yet remain severely under-represented in senior positions in the business world.

■ In Westminster, men still outnumber women MPs by almost five to one and the Counting Women In campaign has estimated that a child born today will be drawing her pension before she has an equal voice in government of her country.

■ Decisions of national and local importance are being made with no input from women which means that the experience and knowledge of half the population is being ignored.

■ In sectors where women make up the majority of the workforce,



such as healthcare and teaching, women are significantly under-represented in the most senior positions, including on the newly formed NHS Clinical Commissioning Group Boards.

■ In the trade union movement, women make up over 50% of the membership and the figure is rising as more women than men are joining trades unions. Although some unions are developing strategies and structures to ensure equality, this is by no means the majority.

■ Representation of women in the media compounds this problem. Women are frequently depicted as sexual objects; less interested than men in social and economic policy; more emotional and unreliable in

the workplace because of pregnancy and child rearing.

We must make our voices heard by:

1. Continuing to highlight the waste of talent by the exclusion of women from positions of power.
2. Challenging sexist images of women in the media.
3. Campaigning for strategies and structures that deliver more opportunities for women to be represented in positions of power in the trade union and labour movement.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
[HTTP://WWW.COUNTINGWOMENIN.ORG/](http://www.countingwomenin.org/)
[HTTP://WWW.OBJECT.ORG.UK/](http://www.object.org.uk/)
[HTTP://WWW.TUC.ORG.UK/EQUALITY/](http://www.tuc.org.uk/equality/)
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