

WIDF SPEECH XV CONGRESS - Edited Version 28 April 2012

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Dear sisters, allies, comrades in the struggle for a just and peaceful world under the auspices of our mother organization, THE WOMENS INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION. We convene our XV Congress at what might be the most critical moment in our history, perhaps in world history. Our earth and all living things may be on the verge of extinction: climate change, global warming, and environmental degradation are real threats in a world of 9 billion people where one percent live lavishly and avariciously, consuming one-quarter of the world's total resources while the rest of us, the 99%, struggle along for work, for bread, for shelter, for dignity and for political power to change our lives.

When our first Congress met in Paris from 26 November to 1 December in 1945 and founded the WOMENS INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION, it marked the end of World War II, the defeat of fascism with its brutal doctrine of Aryan racial superiority. And let us remember that in our present times, Aryan racial superiority and white supremacy are the same evil animal. It is raising its head again in Europe and most assuredly in the United States as the headlines about the Black teenager Trayvon Martin, shot dead by a 29-year-old white man in the state of Florida ...shot dead because he was black and walking in a white neighborhood.

The Marshall Plan rebuilt Europe. The colonized countries in Africa and Asia were determined to achieve their political independence and, for the most part, they did. By the end of the 20th century, a conquered Germany and a defeated Japan had emerged ironically as world economic leaders.

The goals of the Women's International Democratic Federation as stated then in 1945 and now in 2012 remain the same:

1. defence of the rights of women
2. defence of the rights of children
3. defence of national independence and democratic freedoms
4. peace and universal disarmament.

These were worthy goals in 1945 and are worthy goals at the dawn of the 21st century, as relevant today as yesterday.

We women represent national affiliates from five continents: Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America. We come together to share ideas and experiences, empowering ourselves as we work towards "a just peace" and examine the horrific effect of the current global economic crisis, especially as it impacts on women and their families.

As an African American woman, I can testify to the profound effects the deep economic crisis has had. In the USA, there are millions of people who suffer high unemployment or underemployment; officially, there are 23.5 million workers unemployed or underemployed; at least 3 million have given up even looking for jobs that do not exist; low wages (MACDONALD's is the largest employer in the USA); absolute poverty and housing foreclosures have all contributed to a deepening atmosphere of defeat, depression and insecurity. Disproportionately affected, of course, are Black, Latino, Native American and immigrant workers who are traditionally the last hired and the first fired. Official unemployment figures for Latino and Black workers now stand at 14.1 per cent and 10.7, respectively; unemployment among young workers aged 16-24 is officially 16.5 %; one in every 7 persons is on food stamps, an important indicator of the vulnerability of the poor and working poor.

The trade union movement remains in disaster mode. The number of workers in private sector unions is back down to what it was before Franklin Delano Roosevelt (before the New Deal) before 1935. Public sector employees and their unions are under heavy attack at the state and local level.

Labor has been staggering since the dreadful and damaging offensives begun in 1981 by President Reagan with the Air Traffic Controllers Union and continued by both Presidents Bush I and Bush II. There has been no labor law reform in the interests of workers in this country in the past 50 years. Moreover, since the 2010 elections and the rising power of hard line Republicans, a brutal attack on public service employees has been unrelenting and vicious. The last three years have seen proposals to take away public sector workers' collective bargaining rights.

Attacks on working people and labor have slashed the minimum wage in Florida and Arizona; blocked investigations of child labor abuses in Iowa; outlawed workers from picketing in Georgia; contributed to "right-to-work" laws in Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Ohio; and attacked basic worker health and safety protections and collective bargaining in every way imaginable and everywhere they can.

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, 61% of local government workers and 52% of state workers are women. Another statistic says that teachers, who are over 81% women, will lose their collective bargaining rights. The many anti-union bills which have multiplied throughout the USA specifically target professions traditionally held by women. Losing labor rights will adversely affect the gains made by the women's movement for women's economic independence. The road to women's emancipation is tied to women's economic independence. Study after study has shown that women in unionized workplaces are more likely to keep their jobs; maternity leave and healthcare which have been staples of union contracts protect mothers in particular from not losing their jobs. Women who had never had a voice have them through the power of collective bargaining, and this is all at risk by the recent bi-partisan moves to break the unions.

Let's talk about health in the USA.

The US spends annually about \$1.7 trillion, or 15.4 percent of our gross domestic product, on health care. But four hundred billion of that money goes for paperwork, administration and real estate and not to the patient. Nearly 30 million adult Americans (half of them full-time workers) and 8 million children have absolutely no health insurance at all.

Prescription drugs cost more in the USA than anywhere in the world. Is it because the giant pharmaceutical companies spend millions paying lobbyists to petition Congress on their behalf? There are more lobbyists in Congress than elected Congress members. Still, with all our health care spending, the United States ranks near the bottom among industrialized countries on life expectancy, infant mortality and virtually every other health index. In fact, the infant mortality rate in Washington DC, our nation's capital, is more than double the infant mortality rate in Beijing. I have heard a statistic that the infant mortality rate in Guinea Bissau is lower than in Harlem, USA. Moreover, the increased attack by rightwing and reactionary forces on women's health issues and against women's rights over their own bodies specifically reproductive rights is sending disturbing signals to women across the country, and the fightback has increased.

At this moment, debate is raging over the administration's healthcare proposal, ObamaCare. Regardless of the Supreme Court's decision, we will still have an inadequate healthcare reform law leaving at least 20 million people uninsured, failing to reduce healthcare costs, and enabling the for-profit, private insurance companies to run amuck with CEOs making annual salaries in the millions. Another example of how profit takes precedence over peoples' needs, benefits and human rights. However, more and more people are embracing the idea of a single payer system, which is called Medicare for All, entitling everyone to lifetime—from cradle-to-grave--health coverage.

The death penalty as capital punishment is first and foremost a violation of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) which states that all human beings have "**the right to life, liberty and security of person.**" To put it in simple terms, Life is a human right. This makes the death penalty our deepest human rights abuse. When governments have the right to take our lives they maintain the power to deny us access to every other human right. And who is on death row in the USA?--the poor, the black, the latino. South Africa under apartheid used to lead the world in capital punishment (the death penalty) but now it is the United States which leads the world with its sanctioned number of state killings: over one thousand two hundred in the last 30 years.

On September 21, 2011, a 43-year-old Black Man, Troy Davis, who spent 20 years on death row for allegedly killing an off-duty police officer was executed by the State of Georgia. You have heard his name because the world and the international community knew the facts of the case which offered more than reasonable doubt as to his guilt. As he lay strapped down on the gurney waiting for the lethal injection which would take his life, Troy Davis said to executioners, "I am innocent and I forgive you." Troy Davis was killed by the State of Georgia in the United States because he was Black, because he was poor. With his death, Troy Davis has become the poster boy for the abolition of the death penalty in the United States.

FOOD

The world produces more food than the global population can consume. With prices for all major food commodities at a 50-year-high, world leaders talk about "food shortages," but worsening hunger is the result of cost inflation.

The number of people who go to bed hungry; the number of people who have never had a full stomach; the number of people who do not eat three meals a day is growing and it is not the lack of food that makes people go hungry it is the price of food, the price of food which lies beyond the reach of- one third of the world's populations. In the USA, 15% of the population is on food stamps, which means that one in every 7 persons would go hungry without this supplemental aid. The root cause of the food crisis is not scarcity, but the failed economic policies of the G8, the eight richest countries of the world (Japan, Germany, UK, USA, Japan, Germany, France, China), namely, trade liberalization and agribusiness, industrial agriculture. These policies, which treat food as a commodity rather than a human right, are responsible for chaotic climate change, oil dependency, and the depletion of the Earth's land and water resources as well as today's food crisis. When I talk about food, I like to quote the Brazilian Catholic priest, Dom Helder Caamara, who said quote when I gave food to the poor. They called me a saint. When I asked why the poor were hungry, they called me a communist.

Public education is under bipartisan attack. Schools are becoming test preparation centers; teaching means "teaching to pass the test." Students are finding that art, music, and physical education are "frills." In Arizona public schools, ethnic studies is now illegal. In higher education, women's studies are increasingly on the chopping block.

George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, covering elementary and secondary education, directed states to assign grades to schools and failing schools can be shut down or handed over to private management firms, voiding union contracts in the process. NCLB allows the Pentagon to recruit in the public schools. Failing schools are a favorite target for the military merchants.

Society needs an educated workforce. That social obligation has been shifted from the government to individual students via student loans. Neoliberal policies have imposed high interest rates and penalties. Moreover, they have eliminated bankruptcy protection, thus making student debt a crushing personal burden on the young generation. They

call it a new form of indentured servitude, leading to an accumulation of over \$1 trillion in debt for young workers, much of it unpayable. This debt is a huge barrier to an economic recovery.

Let's talk about foreign policy

The United States has almost one thousand military bases around the world. These bases attack the sovereignty of the host countries: crimes committed by the military are outside the jurisdiction of the host country. Bases cause environmental contamination, reinforce dehumanizing treatment of women and girls, condone criminal activities committed by US troops. In South Korea, the government, itself, conspired with the US military to provide prostitutes for the "recreational system" of US soldiers. Furthermore, the cost to the United States of maintaining its network of foreign military bases diverts funds from addressing urgent domestic needs.

Increasingly the US military has drone bases that are dotting the planet. This expanding American empire of unmanned drone bases set up around the world is run by the military, the Central Intelligence Agency, and their proxies. Control centers are the vertebrae of a new American robotic way of war. They are also the latest development in a long-evolving saga of American power projection abroad--in this case, remote-controlled strikes anywhere on the planet with minimal "foreign footprint" and little accountability.

Over the past few months, there has been much talk about the possibility of a U.S. war with Iran. Israel, one of the U.S.'s closest allies in the region, is threatening military action, which could pull the U.S. into war. Despite the fact that top U.S. intelligence officials have made consistent statements that Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program, President Obama, the Republican presidential candidates and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle are saying that "all options are on the table" to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Let's stop this war before it starts. This is a national campaign which is growing daily: NO IRAQ IN IRAN!

The mass media, owned and controlled by the giants of industry, wants to divert our attention from the present catastrophic economic situation and those who should and must be held responsible and accountable because it was their actions, not ours, it was their greed, not ours, that has brought us and the entire world to the brink of disaster.

We live in an era of psychological warfare and mass hysteria generated by mass communication that already led us to over 100 major conflicts in the last century and has cost tens of millions of lives. It is getting worse as wars are started by a few special interest groups, a few rich media owners can push for them, and a few soldiers can execute them via remote control and pilot-less planes that butcher thousands at the push of a button. The insane era where sanctions on Iraq were introduced to satisfy a special lobby caused the death of over a million Iraqi civilians; a flood of millions of Iraqi refugees and then a war and occupation in which a million more have been killed. Some claim a clash of religions or of 'civilizations' to justify these abominations but excess greed can explain it better; the greed for natural resources: oil, water, gold, copper, coltan, etc. But humans also fail to learn the lessons of history or to re-examine our own dogmatic beliefs that allow greedy people to exploit us and take us into wars in the name of 'nation' or 'religion' or 'ideology'.

We need solutions for jobs, foreclosures, crumbling infrastructures, mass transportation, affordable housing. We need an educational system to prepare our children to live decently and abundantly in the 21st century. We need to shift from fossil fuels to renewable forms of energy with green efficiency. The melting of glaciers resulting from climate change and the lack of adequate water management policies are fueling conflicts worldwide. We need to demand tough action by federal governments to create clean energy and other needed jobs. We want our taxes invested not in endless wars for empire but for what we need here at home.

We do not need war. We need peace.

We must continue to make the connection between Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bikini and Fukushima. The Chernobyl Disaster killed almost 5,000 people in the Ukraine and the site today is still a vast covered wasteland. We must continue the struggle to abolish the threat of nuclear annihilation by abolishing all nuclear weapons from our countries and the world. The surviving hibakusha and the people of Japan demand no less of us.

In the U.S. half of our budget goes to war and militarism, while we don't have health care, our education system is broken, we have hundreds of thousands of people without homes to call their own. In the United States of America, too often too many of our elders have to choose between buying medicines or paying for heat or air conditioning. And one of the by-products of our economic crisis is seldom talked about but it is domestic violence and those statistics are rising sharply.

Dear Sisters, We are on the move, moving forward, but what are we moving forward to? What is our vision for the future and how do we define that vision and, perhaps more importantly, how do we bring the dream into realization...into consciousness, into commitment, to being the active agents of the change that we want for our communities?

Dear sisters, we are activists, fighting for a just future, for a fair future where human rights are put before corporate rights.

We must wake up our sisters who sleep under the illusion that they have freedom while our freedoms, our security, our job security our food security, our health security are being stolen away from us.

We have no rights when our rights are not respected. Wake up, sisters! Agitate and inform, organize and educate our sisters and brothers to the reality of the present dangers.

We know the enemy and there is a reason they are called the ruling class—because they have ruled and want to continue to rule. But it is US,--WE, the PEOPLE, people who make history, not the rulers, and the ultimate responsibility for the fate of the world rests with us and our friends and allies at home and around the world. We are the ruling women and we will sweep into the dustbins of history those who stand in our way—stand in the way for a just peace and a living wage and a guaranteed annual income and healthcare for all, for a decent non-racist non-sexist education and responsible mass media that is not the puppet of the corporate pigs who gobble up our resources. We want housing and adequate shelter for all and healthcare for all. We are the custodians of this planet and we will not let the so-called ruling class stop us as we work to organize, unite and struggle for change.

Dear sisters--all under the umbrella of FDIM, Womens International Democratic Federation--we celebrate diversity, but not division. We celebrate the fact that what binds us together is far greater than those elements and negative forces and institutions that keep us apart.

I close with the words of the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish who died a few years ago, and I quote:

“THINK OF OTHERS

As you prepare your breakfast, think of others - don't forget to feed the pigeons.

As you conduct your wars – think of others - don't forget those who want peace

As you go home, your own home – think of others – don't forget those who live in tents

And as you think of others, think of yourself and say “I wish I were a candle in the darkness.”

Thank you.