

NO GOING BACK!

SOCIALIST FEMINISM & THE STRUGGLE FOR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS



reform &
revolution

A MARXIST
CAUCUS
IN THE
DEMOCRATIC
SOCIALISTS
OF AMERICA

No Going Back!

A pamphlet by Reform & Revolution, a Marxist caucus in DSA, May 2022

As of publication in May 2022, some of the most important and hardest-won achievements of the feminist and LGBT+ movements are under direct attack. Bodily autonomy is openly threatened by an ultra-conservative majority on the Supreme Court.

At the same time, a new generation of activists is increasingly committed to fundamental social change. Inspired by the revival of socialist ideas in the wake of Bernie Sanders' campaigns, educated by the Black Lives Matter movement, and now making its first steps in workplace organizing at Starbucks and Amazon, this new wave of activism is reinvigorating hope in left-wing politics and building momentum through struggle.

In many ways, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is at the center of these efforts - its growth to almost 100,000 members was an expression of the political revolution against the billionaire class and the uprisings against the murder of George Floyd.

DSA is a broad, democratic, and primarily membership-run organization. It's far from perfect, but it offers us a place to work together in the common struggle against exploitation and oppression, and to clarify which ideas and tactics are needed for us to fight and win.

This is why we believe that it is crucial for us within DSA to discuss how we plan to counter this attack on reproductive rights, and to link that discussion to a debate about the role socialist feminist ideas have to play in the wider feminist movement.

Some of the articles in this pamphlet were developed over the last years, while others are very new, but all aim to apply Marxist ideas to this new chapter of feminist struggles.

If you agree with the perspectives and ideas here, please consider joining DSA and our caucus.

In solidarity,
Reform & Revolution

reform & revolution

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Defend *Roe v. Wade* – and Don't Stop There!



BY REFORM & REVOLUTION'S STEERING COMMITTEE

REFORMANDREVOLUTION.ORG

The Role of Socialists in the Fight for Reproductive Rights

The Supreme Court is launching an attack on *Roe v. Wade*. This is a massive threat to women, pregnant people, and the human right to bodily autonomy.

It is a huge overreach with the potential to trigger a monumental backlash. According to a recent poll, 69 percent of the US does not want to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned (CNN, January 21, 2022), and this brazen attack is coming from an increasingly discredited Supreme Court. Five of the Court's six conservative justices were appointed by presidents who lost the popular vote.

The legal basis for overturning *Roe v. Wade* also represents a clear threat to other vital privacy rights previously decided by the Supreme Court, such as the right to interracial marriage, contraception, same-sex marriage, and LGBT+ rights generally. At the same time, we are seeing escalating attacks on trans people and right-wing efforts to eliminate discussion in schools about racism, sexuality and sexual identity that are likely to end up in front of the Supreme Court over the next years – with these ultra-conservatives in charge.

Now is the time for mass action in the streets to stop these attacks.

We need mass protests and struggle to either force the Supreme Court to back down or pressure the Democrats, and so-called pro-choice Republicans like Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski, to abolish the filibuster and pass the Women's Health Protection Act in the Senate, which would codify *Roe v. Wade* into law. Such a movement should also demand that President Biden and Congress expand the Supreme Court.

None of that will happen just because of Democratic Party majorities in both chambers and a Democrat sitting in the White House. It will take a massive movement in the streets that exerts sharp pressure on the Democrats and their big business backers to force them to take these steps.



■ The potential exists for a massive movement to defend and extend abortion rights.

■ Socialists can play a critical role in making sure this materializes by increasing the pressure on key forces that have the authority to initiate mass protests: Planned Parenthood, the Squad, Bernie Sanders, labor unions and, to some extent, NOW, NARAL, and the Women's March.

■ Within DSA's "call on all DSA chapters, members, and electeds to mobilize immediately against this violent attack on abortion rights", tinyurl.com/dsa-abortion-rights, DSA could boldly promote the proposal to these organizations and political leaders to issue a call for mass action, a million-person march in Washington in September, and for student walkouts and worker strikes. DSA could call on labor and the feminist organizations to prepare a one day feminist strike in schools, colleges and workplaces.

■ DSA can help rally the left-wing of this broader movement into a socialist feminist force that advances its own demands and strategy.

Unfortunately, the forces that have the most authority to put out calls for millions to take to the streets – Planned Parenthood and others – are held back by their liberal politics which look toward the Democratic party as part of an incremental electoral and legal strategy. Sending out fundraising appeals and calling on people to vote for Democrats will not stop this assault on reproductive rights – and everything else in the pipeline of these ultra-conservative justices.

DSA and the socialist movement is not strong enough to substitute for these forces. But DSA can play a key role in rallying a core of more radical youth, women, LGBT+ activists, and workers. And with those forces, we can increase the pressure on Planned Parenthood and others to take the action necessary to fight back.

DSA nationally called on all chapters to boldly step in and challenge the status quo, tinyurl.com/dsa-abortion-rights and set up a special campaign website, protectabortion.org. That was a good initiative to build on.

We need to mobilize whenever there is a call for mass action and move labor and feminist organizations forward to finally overcome their hesitancy and step up. DSA nationally should put the idea forward to those organizations to collectively mobilize a million people to march on Washington for reproductive rights. At both the national and local level, DSA could reach out to labor unions, student groups, and other

allies to prepare a one-day feminist strike and student walkout, with the goal of putting added pressure on the Court, Congress, and big business, while also strengthening our own ability to fight back independently.

For Socialist Feminism

Our starting demand is to defend *Roe v. Wade*. But we as socialists should also point out that we need to go further. The only way to protect reproductive rights is to widen them and make them accessible for all, regardless of one's class, income, race, or location.

Capitalism can't exist without dividing the working class. Capitalism can't exist without sexism, racism and many more lines of division and hatred. This is why the struggle for abortion rights, against misogyny and for LGBT+ rights is linked to the struggle to end this system based on exploitation and oppression.

DSA could boldly argue for socialist feminism in contrast to the liberal feminism of the main organizations. In our view, socialist feminism can be most concretely popularized at this stage by championing the following demands:

- **Defend Roe v. Wade**
 - ◆ **Pass the Women's Health Protection Act in Congress & end the filibuster**
 - ◆ **Expand the Supreme Court**
- **Medicare for All, including:**
 - ◆ **Legal, safe, & free abortions**
 - ◆ **Free birth control & other reproductive services**
 - ◆ **Free gender-affirming healthcare**
- **Free and universal childcare & paid family leave**
- **Living wages & affordable housing**

It's time to openly challenge the Republican right and the Wall Street Democrats with a clear socialist opposition that aims to build toward a new, mass Democratic Socialist party. Even in the coming months, every step we take where we don't just trail "progressives" in the Democratic Party but build power toward an alternative, will make it that much more likely that they will be forced to respond to the urgent call to action.

This is the time for DSA's four elected members in Congress to form a socialist caucus and declare their opposition to inaction and pro-corporate liberalism. Feminist struggles that center working-class and oppressed people should target all the failed promises that Biden put forward to get votes and support in the first

place: Where is the \$15 per hour minimum wage – or at least a vote on it? This is a feminist issue that impacts women much more than men. Why were the child tax benefits ended? Where is the urgent action to address climate change? Where are the policies to dismantle structural racism? Why did the PRO Act not pass, which would have banned the very types of union busting that Amazon and Starbucks are using against workers right now?

Regardless of what promises are made during campaign season, once elections are over, it is the Wall Street donors who again and again call the shots in the Democratic Party.

The struggle to defend pregnant people, to end misogyny, to protect trans rights and workers' rights, is a struggle that is focused at the moment against the right-wing dominated Supreme Court. However, on a deeper level, this is the struggle of working-class and oppressed people to fight for a dignified life in a society built on economic, racial, and gender justice.

Our task as socialists is to be at the forefront of this struggle to defend *Roe v. Wade* – and, within this struggle, to speak out about the need to fight for a rupture with this capitalist society, for a democratic, socialist future.



Winning the Right to Choose - Then and Now



BY ANYA MAE LEMLICH AND RAMY KHALIL

What the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s teaches us about the fight for reproductive justice today

Overturing *Roe v. Wade* has been a central goal of the right ever since the women's liberation movement achieved this historic victory on January 22, 1973. They've succeeded in substantially eroding it. Even before the recent attack on *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court, 43 states have prohibited abortion after a certain point in pregnancy, Oklahoma passed a near-total abortion ban, and more state-level abortion restrictions (90) have been enacted in 2021 than in any year since 1973.

The Supreme Court justices who are attacking *Roe v. Wade* are the same

ones who struck down the core of the historic Voting Rights Act in June at a time when Republicans are trying to pass hundreds of laws across the country restricting voting rights, disproportionately excluding working-class people and people of color.

One way to stop the threat would be to expand the Supreme Court. Congress, controlled by Democrats, has the power to expand the court and appoint a progressive majority. Biden set up a commission to study this. However, it's clear that the Democratic leadership has no intention of expanding the court or building a movement to defend *Roe v. Wade*.

This leaves us only one option – to organize a wave of enormous grassroots protests, including a massive march on Washington. Activists need to demand that the leaders of Planned Parenthood, National Organization for Women (NOW), the Women's March, unions,

the Poor People's Campaign, DSA, Bernie, the Squad, and others issue a united call for escalating national days of action. A mass campaign needs to not only defend *Roe v. Wade*, but go on the offensive: demanding a repeal of abortion restrictions, a Medicare for All system that includes free abortion and reproductive healthcare, and more.

In fact, this has been done before. We can learn a lot from the mass protests that feminists organized in the 1960s and '70s which successfully pressured the Supreme Court to pass *Roe v. Wade*, despite the conservative majority on the court at that time.

Abortion before *Roe v. Wade*

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, oppressed and working-class people around the world rose up demanding equality, self-determination, and socialism. Colonized people revolted and overthrew imperialist powers, ten million workers in France brought the country to a halt in the 1968 General Strike, and in Czechoslovakia, workers rose up against Stalinism to demand genuine democratic socialism. In the US, the Black freedom movement shook society, millions protested the Vietnam War, and wildcat strikes swept the country in the early '70s.

Amidst the rapid radicalization sweeping society, women in the US began openly talking about gender oppression and organizing for their own freedom, in what was originally called the women's liberation movement and later termed the second-wave feminist movement.

This movement was cross-class and multi-racial, and encompassed a mix of different strategies and theories of change, often conflicting but coming together in shared fights. While the movement put forward a range of demands, the right to legal abortion emerged as a central one (alongside free childcare and equal opportunity) because women understood that they could never be free without control over their reproductive lives.

Abortions have always occurred throughout human history, whether under safe conditions or not. Abortion was first outlawed in feudal Europe during the early rise of capitalism, but it wasn't banned in the US until the mid-19th century. In the US, approximately one million women had abortions annually before the procedure was legalized in 1973, resulting in the deaths of some 5,000 women every year.¹

It was hard to tell whether an abortionist would use safe anesthesia and sterile instruments or whether they knew how to perform an abortion safely. Many people, with no other option, administered self-induced abortions with coat hangers or other sharp objects.

Approximately a third of the million people having abortions each year had to be hospitalized for complications.² When complications developed, women would often delay medical treatment for fear of criminal charges.

*Planned Parenthood, NOW, unions, Bernie, the Squad, and others need to issue a united call for nationwide protests to defend *Roe v. Wade*.*

In Leslie Reagan's book, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, a woman recounts a story of a college classmate who had an abortion: "She was too frightened to tell anyone what she had done. So when she developed complications, she tried to take care of it herself. She locked herself in the bathroom between two dorm rooms and quietly bled to death."³

The criminalization of abortion disproportionately forced lower-income women and women of color into these dangerous situations. Rich women, however, could afford safe abortions by paying a private doctor exorbitant fees or traveling to a country where abortion was legal.

Underground networks of activists, doctors, lawyers, and welfare rights groups risked arrest to direct women to physicians who would perform safe abortions. Abortion rights supporters had been persistently lobbying the government to legalize abortion under certain conditions but made very little progress – until the women's liberation movement exploded onto the streets in the late '60s.⁴

Rising Expectations

The growing number of women working outside the home and the rising yet unfulfilled expectations of the post-war economic upswing were crucial factors that contributed to the emergence of the women's liberation movement. Working outside the home and earning their own money increased women's economic independence, confidence, and collective consciousness.



World Wars I and II as well as the massive postwar economic expansion drew record numbers of women into the waged workforce. During WWII, the US government opened 3,000 federally subsidized, affordable childcare centers in 49 states to induce women, primarily married white women, to work in factories while men fought the war. After the war ended, the government and corporations used different mechanisms to try and push women back into the home, often refusing to rehire them. The government shut down the childcare centers, and waged a massive propaganda campaign glorifying the joys of motherhood and home-making as women's duty in the fight against "communism."

But many working-class women, especially women of color, couldn't afford to stay home. They often had to take underpaid and undervalued care sector jobs – cleaners, nurses, secretaries, school teachers, restaurant workers – where they faced constant disrespect and humiliation. The median income of working women in 1960 was only about one-third that of men.⁵

Rising living standards and the opening of college doors to women in order to satisfy corporations' demands for more skilled managers and professionals raised women's expectations that they could improve their lives through college and a career. However, many women still found doors slammed in their faces by sexist cultural norms and a capitalist system resistant to change.

A Cross-Class, Multi-Racial Movement

Betty Friedan, a left and labor journalist, was one of the first to put words to the depression, isolation, and loneliness that many women faced in the home. In 1963, she published *The Feminist Mystique*, and in 1966, she co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW). Both her book and the emergence of NOW are often viewed by historians as the start of the second-wave feminist movement.

NOW campaigned primarily against employment discrimination, filing over 1,000 lawsuits against corporations, many of which were victorious. The surge of new activists was reflected in NOW's membership figures, which grew by leaps and bounds from 300 in 1966 to 40,000 in 1974.⁶

NOW's liberal leadership did not want to challenge capitalism; instead they sought an equal place for women within the system. This political agenda meant they often focused on demands that were most immediately impactful to middle-class, white, and straight women. They tried to push radical groups away, for fear they would jeopardize the movement. Friedan famously referred to lesbians as the "lavender menace" – which some lesbians then reclaimed, forming a group by that name to organize for lesbian visibility and liberation.



Women's march against Nixon during the Republican Convention in Miami, August 1972

Photo: Washington Area Spark, tinyurl.com/womens-march-against-nixon, Copyright: CC BY-NC 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/

Contrary to some contemporary critiques of the second-wave feminist movement, organizations like NOW and their primarily middle-class and white membership were not the only active ones, nor were they always the most influential. Socialist, working-class, lesbian, POC, and Black women organized to fight for their interests as well. But they rarely coalesced into a shared movement: as Sharon Smith writes in her book *Women and Socialism*, "there were a number of different women's movements that progressed on parallel tracks, largely separated not only on the basis of politics but also on the basis of race, sexuality and class."

The National Welfare Rights Organization was founded in 1966, and had around 25,000 members at their peak in 1969, most of whom were Black. One of their organizers, Johnnie Tillmon, argued that women should be paid a living wage for the child-raising and housekeeping work they were already doing. She wrote, "For a lot of middle-class women in this country, Women's Liberation is a matter of concern. For women on welfare it's a matter of survival."

After participating in union struggles for decades, women escalated the struggle in the 1960s against sexist conditions in their workplaces. In 1968, domestic workers – predominantly Black women – created the National Domestic Workers Union. In 1972, flight attendants launched the Stewardesses for Women's Rights, an organization that used a variety of militant tactics, including slow-downs and sick-outs, to win demands against objectification. Clerical workers, who faced degradation, humiliation, and harassment at work – exemplified in the classic 1980 film *9 to 5* – formed unions.

Feminist groups sprung up around the country to take matters of sexual assault and domestic violence into their own hands. People created rape crisis centers, rape hotlines, and domestic violence shelters.

Socialists and Marxists were active in the movement, forming their own organizations and/or joining others, the largest of which was a socialist-feminist organization called the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. They created an abortion-providing group called the Jane Collective, which provided safe procedures to primarily working-class people. They also created Women Employed, which lobbied for decent wages and working conditions, and DARE (Direct Action for Rights in Employment) which campaigned against unfair labor practices against women janitors. And they created the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, an issue for predominantly poor women and women of color, who maintained that reproductive justice included the right to choose to have children, not just the right to choose not to.

Mass movements, like the women's liberation movement, can grow quite quickly and affect dramatic social change.

Many women also fought sexism that existed within the "New Left." Similarly, women of color experienced racism within the feminist movement, and some women of color decided to form their own separate organizations. In 1973 the National Black Feminist Organization was created in New York, and in 1977 a group of Black feminists launched the Combahee River Collective, who coined the term "identity politics."

Women's Liberation

Beginning in 1967, young radical women came together to form local groups to discuss their

oppression, breaking apart stereotypes and ideas that were previously normalized as natural or biological. By 1969, this practice had spread to over 40 cities and had a name – consciousness-raising. As Jenny Brown puts it, "consciousness-raising was the program of the 1960's women's liberation movement... It was responsible for really spreading women's liberation across the country by 1970."

In consciousness-raising groups, women questioned unequal gender roles and talked frankly about sexual issues which had been hidden causes for shame and embarrassment, turning depression into anger and building self-confidence and strength together. They began openly speaking about rape and abortion, masturbation, and menstruation. They gave language to phenomena like "rape culture" and "sexual harassment." The phrase "the personal is political" originated with these groups, describing how events happening to people in the "private" sphere were shared experiences, common, and systemic.

Women's liberation groups also debated strategies for the movement. Many considered NOW's emphasis on courtroom tactics too conservative. Instead, they organized demonstrations in the streets and took direct action to confront instances of sexism, making far-reaching demands for changing society.

One powerful organizing tool was a "speak-out" where people publicly shared stories about their abortion experiences. A group called Redstockings in New York, after protesting at a state hearing about reforming abortion laws in which men and one nun were the only "experts" asked to testify, organized their own hearing where the real experts, women who had had an abortion, spoke. The practice spread. One activist explained that their speak-out was "unbelievably successful and it turned out to be an incredible organizing tool. It brought abortion out of the closet where it had been hidden in secrecy and shame. It informed the public that most women were having abortions anyway. People spoke from their hearts."⁷

Direct action and pressure campaigns proliferated across the country. In New York, feminists testified before the legislature distributing copies of their model abortion law – a blank piece of paper.⁸ In Washington State in 1970, grassroots and socialist organizations campaigned for a state-wide ballot initiative to legalize abortion. They door-knocked, leafleted, held rallies, and sold 10,000 copies of a pamphlet titled "One in Four of Us Have Had or Will Have an Abortion," which helped convince 56 percent of voters to vote for the initiative.

While many socialist-feminist and radical groups were small, they often pushed NOW and other mainstream organizations to the left. As more women became active and outspoken, NOW began to incorporate more assertive tactics, like protests and mass actions. In 1968, they succeeded in ending sex-segregated job listings in newspapers by combining lawsuits with mass actions.

Striking Back

Each new victory scored by the women's movement embittered the right-wing anti-feminist opposition, spearheaded by the Catholic Church hierarchy along with evangelical Protestant leaders. In 1971, a bipartisan majority in Congress voted for the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have made the government responsible for providing childcare for all children. Yet the right wing pressured President Nixon to veto, scoring a major victory.

In his veto message, Nixon described the act as “the most radical piece of legislation to emerge from the 93rd Congress,” and said it would “commit the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child-rearing” and “would lead to the Sovietization of American children.”⁹

In response to the “New Right” backlash, NOW called a national Women's Strike for Equality. Held on August 26, 1970, it commemorated the 50th anniversary of the day women won the right to vote.

100,000 women marched, picketed, protested, and held teach-ins, skits, and domestic strikes across the country.

A debate opened up among activists about what the demands of the women's strike should be. Liberal middle-class elements in the movement limited their demands to the legal right to abortion, childcare, and equal employment opportunities.¹⁰ Socialists and working-class women wanted more – free abortion on demand, free 24-hour community-controlled childcare, and equal pay for equal work.¹¹

Socialist feminists rejected the supposedly more “realistic and practical” call for reforming the existing abortion laws, for which previous abortion rights activists had been lobbying for years without success. Instead, they insisted on the full repeal of

all laws limiting a woman's right to abortion, as well as government funding for abortion to make it free and accessible.¹³

The popularity of these more radical demands caused NOW and the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws/National Abortion Rights Action League, (NARAL, founded in 1969) to call for the abolition of all laws restricting abortion – the first mainstream organizations to do so.

Socialist ideas were a strong influence in the movement. Many looked to the 1917 Russian Revolution, for example, which brought to power the first government in the world to establish free abortion, free community-run childcare, and equal pay for equal work, as well as free socialized healthcare and the decriminalization of divorce and homosexuality.

The two wings carried their different banners together in the largest women's rights demonstrations since the suffrage movement.¹⁴ 100,000 women marched, picketed, protested, and held teach-ins, skits, and domestic strikes across the country. In New York City, protesters hung a banner on the Statue of Liberty which read, “Women of the World Unite.”¹⁵

Political Balance in Society Shifts

Although the feminist movement never reached the massive size of the Black freedom movement, hundreds of local protests demanding the legalization of abortion took place between 1969 and 1973.¹⁶ Court actions to do away with laws against abortion began in over 20 states between 1968 and 1970.¹⁷

By the early '70s, the movement's persistent demand for legalizing abortion without any restrictions compelled 11 state governments to liberalize their abortion laws, allowing the procedure under certain conditions.¹⁸

Despite these concessions, socialist feminists continued to insist on free abortion to prevent market forces from getting in the way of women's needs. In New York, for example, the availability of abortion attracted women from all over the country, driving the price of abortion through the roof, making it less accessible to lower-income women and women of color.¹⁹

Finally, on January 22, 1973 the Supreme Court issued its historic *Roe v. Wade* ruling, striking down all state laws prohibiting abortion during the first three months of pregnancy.



Pro-choice demonstrators outside the Supreme Court on the day of the opening arguments in the Webster v. Reproductive Health Services case, April 26, 1989.

Photo: Lorie Shaull, tinyurl.com/SCOTUS-abortion, Copyright: CC BY-SA 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/

This crucial victory took place under the administration of President Richard Nixon – a conservative Republican adamantly opposed to abortion – and a Supreme Court with a majority of Republican appointees. Nixon had insisted only two years before: “Unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life – including the life of the yet unborn.”²⁰ (The New York Women's Strike Coalition replied: “We will grant Mr. Nixon the freedom to take care of his uterus if he will let us take care of ours.”)²¹

Activists' persistent organizing had shifted public opinion in favor of the right of women to decide whether and when to have an abortion. By 1969, 64 percent of Americans considered the decision on abortion a private matter, and in 1976, 63 percent of women supported efforts “to strengthen and change the status of women in society.”²³

Lessons for Today

The women's liberation movement transformed public and private life for women: the cultural

and political change was reflected in legal wins, like *Roe v. Wade*, as well as literature, art, higher education, and daily life. The explosive growth of this movement disproves the idea put forward by many liberals – then and now – that change only happens gradually, step-by-step. Mass movements, like the women's liberation movement, can grow quite quickly, and can affect dramatic social change.

The past 50 years show that reforms won under capitalism will always be temporary.

Victories like *Roe v. Wade* were not handed down by enlightened judges or politicians from either party, but won in spite of them. Feminists had to fight hard for these gains by building their own independent mass movement and large-scale protests. The courts, laws, and political system are not immune from mass pressure; they do respond to shifts in public opinion, and activists can sway them by building mass

protest movements which convince and inspire the majority of working-class people.

This was demonstrated again by two marches on Washington in 1989 that drew a total of 900,000 people and another protest of over 500,000 in 1992 which impacted the Supreme Court's 1989 *Webster* ruling and its 1992 *Casey* ruling. The Court's *Casey* majority opinion admitted: "A decision to overrule *Roe* ... under the existing circumstances would address error, if error there was, at the cost of both profound and unnecessary damage to the Court's legitimacy." Translated – criminalizing abortion would lead to a massive backlash and undermine the legitimacy of the Court, due to widespread public support for abortion rights.²⁴

The feminist movement would not have been as successful if it had not been part of a broader upswell of mass working-class struggles, expressed in Black freedom struggles, the anti-war movement, and a wave of wildcat strikes in the early 1970s. The ruling class, worried about a threat to the capitalist system itself, was compelled to grant concessions – substantial

reforms – to these movements, to protect the integrity of their system as a whole.

Unfortunately, however, the feminist movement was not prepared for the unceasing attacks on women's and workers' rights since the rise of neo-liberalism, the Reagan era, and the rightward shift of the Democrats. The right to abortion has been steadily eroded since 1973, most immediately with the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1977, which banned the use of federal funds for abortions (signed into law by Democratic President Jimmy Carter). Though abortion was still legal, this severely restricted working-class women from accessing it.

Fifteen years later, the Supreme Court further weakened *Roe v. Wade* with the ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which – while upholding the decision in *Roe* – allowed states to adopt restrictions on abortion in the first trimester. That opened the door for one restriction after another. Despite very effective direct action to defend abortion clinics from right-wing violence, the religious right's unswerving legislative attacks on abortion has meant that it

Women's Strike for Equality in New York City, August 26, 1970

Photo: RV1864, <https://tinyurl.com/womens-strike-for-equality>
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is almost impossible for working-class women in many states to access any abortion services. The legal right to an abortion is valuable, but it's not enough if abortion and reproductive services are not also accessible and affordable.

Some radical feminists, reacting to their anger at a sexist society, viewed men as the enemy of women and argued that men had nothing to gain by taking part in the feminist movement. Proposals for separatist communities (women living separately from men) sprung up, sometimes by lesbians as a response to homophobia within the movement. Yet these ideas pitted working-class women and men against one another, and made it harder for the feminist movement to grow. Although the movement won many gains, its appeal was limited by both the liberals and many radicals' failure to adopt a socialist class-struggle program that could bring together all working-class people by asserting that working-class men would also gain from ending sexist oppression, and by linking the fight for gender justice to the fight for economic justice.

We can learn from socialists' insistence on calling for far-reaching changes. The radicals' bold, unapologetic case for free abortion on demand with no restrictions raised the confidence of millions of people and changed the terms of public debate. This stands in stark contrast to the apologetic, timid defense of abortion by today's leaders of NOW, NARAL, and Planned Parenthood, who continually preach "moderation" and "realism."

A working-class political party would help unite progressive movements against the capitalist elite and all forms of oppression.

Our feminist movement today can bring back the still-powerful demands of the socialists of the 1970s. The new political platform adopted by Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), for example, calls for free abortion on demand, the repeal of all laws restricting abortion, universal childcare, and an end to forced sterilization. DSA, along with other feminist groups, should wage campaigns around these demands, bringing together a concerted national fight, particularly while the Supreme Court is reviewing a case that threatens, yet again, to weaken or overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

And we can learn from the creative, wide-ranging tactics of the second-wave feminists. All sorts of direct actions, public skits, debates, marches, and protests are at our disposal, made even more accessible through modern technology. The #MeToo movement has been a powerful example of the effect that mass speak-outs can have on public consciousness and their ability to affect change.

The experience of the past 50 years shows that reforms won under capitalism will always be temporary and partial. The ruling class can be compelled to make certain concessions, such as legalizing abortion, under the pressure of mass movements, but as soon as these movements subside, the ruling class has an interest in promoting and fostering right-wing, conservative ideas and forces to roll back reforms. The ruling class also has an interest in stoking culture wars in order to divert attention away from their incredibly unequal system of class rule.

We must build not only periodic protests but ongoing broad mass organizations that can lead a sustained movement against the ruling elite. In particular a working-class political party would be able to unite progressive movements together against the ruling class and set our sights on overthrowing the capitalist system itself.

Anya Mae Lemlich is a food service worker and a socialist feminist activist. Ramy Khalil is a history teacher and a member of the Seattle Education Association.

Endnotes

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Fighting Together?



BY REFORM & REVOLUTION'S STEERING COMMITTEE, OCTOBER 12, 2021

REFORMANDREVOLUTION.ORG



A Debate about DSA work in Mass Working-Class Protests in the Women's Movement: Should DSA's Socialist Feminist Work Group Have Supported Protests Organized by the Women's March?

The October 2nd 2021 Women's March saw mass protests against the Texas abortion ban and additional threats to *Roe v. Wade* from the Supreme Court in hundreds of places across the country. Shortly before the marches, the DSA's Socialist Feminist Working Group (SFWG) issued a statement that they could not support the protests. The Steering Committee of the SFWG argued that "the Women's March leadership have shown a bias for creating space for cisgender, white women." "In addition," they wrote, "as socialists we believe that in order to achieve a non-patriarchal society the capitalist system must be abolished, a view that is not supported by the Women's March organizers." (see box on the right)

Responding in an article in the *Tempest*, Emma Wilde Botta and Natalia Tylim make the case for why the October 2 Women's March was a missed opportunity for DSA, and how to use such mobilizations to build a socialist defense of abortion rights, tinyurl.com/tempest-oct.

Attacks from the Supreme Court as well as several state legislatures over the next months are likely to continue and expand not only against abortion and reproductive rights but also transgender

rights and much more. Given that, this debate is not just about this one march but the continuing mass struggles around workers, women's and BIPOC issues for the foreseeable future.

Obviously, given the currently low level of struggle of the women's movement, it is not led by socialists, and does not have openly socialist demands. The Women's March was indeed called by a coalition including Democratic Party leaders, as well as representatives of mainstream women's groups, as were previous similar Women's Marches. These leaders traditionally advance vague liberal slogans, encourage lobbying and voting for Democratic Party representatives as the paramount opposition strategy, which as Botta and Tylim point out, is "a strategy synonymous with ruling class feminism that has a narrow and exclusive definition of what advancing gender equality looks like."

Yet we have seen time and again that these mass mobilizations encompass a wide variety of forces and politics, many far further to the left than the organizers. Mass movements by their very nature always include a wide variety of political trends and organizations. And given current attacks on women's rights, this is likely to continue as the movement expands. As the *Tempest* article points out, "A mass movement around defending abortion access should be just that – open to anyone and everyone who wants to fight around that issue, while also clarifying disagreements between participating forces."

Also, in the face of openly reactionary legislation and court decisions, the movement may be likely to radicalize. The Working Group statement even points to this potential, saying, "[The march] provides an opportunity for our members who are interested in attending to spread socialist ideas and have a dialogue with attendees who may be sympathetic to the socialist feminist cause." However, they conclude, "the Working Group

cannot say in good faith that socialist feminism will be fought for at the march."

This will certainly not happen if socialist forces abstain from taking part in mass events such as these. It is an especially sectarian stand, coming from a group which is part of a multi-tendency organization representing a number of different socialist trends and political influences. Fortunately, DSA and other socialist groups appear to be present in a number of protests, though a better stand by the SFWG could have encouraged a higher turnout.

Mass mobilizations like October 2nd are important tools to oppose attacks on working people, on women, on BIPOC, and on transgender people and a great arena to promote building a militant women's movement, in contrast to the politics of some of the organizers. DSA should absolutely endorse protests that bring together a wide spectrum of people, even if the organizing groups are not socialist. Promoting our slogans, banners, and politics gives us the maximum opportunity to engage with activists to discuss how to create and promote an independent, democratic socialist message. As Botta and Tylim point out, "People do not need to be socialists to organize around defending *Roe v. Wade*, but some people will become socialists through that experience."

This is a vital discussion for DSA members. Please read the DSA Socialist Feminist Working Group Steering Committee's statement (since it was not published online, we publish it here on the right for everybody to make up their mind) along with the *Tempest* critique, tinyurl.com/tempest-oct.

From the National Steering Committee of the Socialist Feminist Working Group in DSA

Sent out via email on September 30, 2021

Dear Comrades,

The sixth Women's March will take place October 2, 2021, in Washington, D.C., and across the US. The rally will be in support of reproductive rights, which are facing serious restrictions with the passing of S.B. 8 in Texas and other laws around the country seeking to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The march aims to influence the Supreme Court, which will reconvene October 4 and will hear two other reproductive health cases in the upcoming term: *Cameron v. EMW Women's Surgical Center, P.S.C.* (10/12/21) and *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (12/1/21). With a conservative majority Supreme Court, this is a critical moment in time for feminists to fight for reproductive justice.

However, the Socialist Feminist Working Group of the Democratic Socialists of America cannot endorse the Women's March. Previous controversies associated with Women's March leadership have shown a bias for creating space for cisgender, white women, leaving BIPOC, transgender, and other marginalized women out of the conversation. The Socialist Feminist Working Group believes that women and non-binary people from all backgrounds need to be included and welcome to participate in the work for total women's liberation. In addition, as socialists we believe that in order to achieve a non-patriarchal society the capitalist system must be abolished, a view that is not supported by the Women's March organizers. Therefore, the Working Group cannot say in good faith that socialist feminism will be fought for at the march.

Many DSA chapters, either officially or unofficially, are attending the Women's March in Washington, D.C., and at smaller local marches. DSA has historically had a presence since the first 2017 Women's March. We support these groups and encourage those who plan to march to join their local DSA feminist group. Although the march is not in support of socialism, it provides an opportunity for our members who are interested in attending to spread socialist ideas and have a dialogue with attendees who may be sympathetic to the socialist feminist cause.

To help expand access to reproductive healthcare in Texas, you can support the following abortion funds:

- Fund Texas Choice <https://fundtexaschoice.org/>
- The Lilith Fund <https://www.lilithfund.org/>
- Texas Equal Access Fund <https://teafund.org/>

To find a local abortion fund near you, visit the Nation Network of Abortion Funds' website at <https://abortionfunds.org/funds/>.

For further information about the Women's March: <https://womensmarch.com/mobilize>

In Solidarity,
Steering Committee of the
National Socialist Feminist Working Group

From #MeToo to Revolutionary Change



BY ANYA MAE LEMLICH

#MeToo exposed the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment. Ending this culture requires a feminist struggle that's prepared to tackle capitalism – and the success of our socialist movement depends on it.

This article was published on June 3, 2019, when Donald Trump was still president and Joe Biden a candidate, but its analysis of the challenges that the #MeToo movement faces are just as relevant today.

In December 2017, two months after sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein burst open the floodgates of women's anger, *Time* Magazine named a hotel housekeeper as a "Silence Breaker" in their Person of the Year issue. Amidst the Hollywood actresses who came forward about Weinstein and the coining of the term #MeToo by activist Tarana Burke, Juana Melara described her experiences cleaning hotel rooms of powerful men.

"I was scrubbing the bathtub on my knees. And I suddenly felt like, you know, something you feel when somebody's watching you. And I turned. And there he was inside that room, in front of the bathroom door, just looking at me. And it scared me," she told *NPR* (December 21, 2017). The man exposed himself to her; she managed to lock him out of the room and had to wait 20 minutes for help (*The Guardian*, August 3, 2018).

A chilling part of Melara's story is its ubiquitousness – Melara says "seven out of ten [of her co-workers], they have some kind of experience like that" – and its familiarity. Women understand well what Melara means by that "feeling of someone watching you." We can taste her fear, we know that feeling of paralysis, of clenching. We spend our lives whispering these ubiquitous and familiar stories to each other, or we keep them deeply hidden, not realizing how ubiquitous and familiar they are.

We needed to shout. And once the floodgates opened, conversation was impossible to contain. Conversation quickly spread to gender violence in low-wage industries, like Melara's, where much of the workforce are women of color and immigrants. California farmworkers were some of the first to stand in solidarity with the women of Hollywood, and conversation around gender violence in the restaurant industry sparked. Soon, we were talking about sexism in all aspects of our lives.

The story of comedian Aziz Ansari in particular forced us to grapple with what constitutes sexual harassment. For many of us, the story was familiar: a man pressuring a woman into a sexual encounter, putting his own desires over respecting another person's boundaries. After Ansari's story broke, I found myself sharing one of my own deeply hidden stories, about someone who had violated my boundaries – perhaps unknowingly, but it doesn't matter –



Photo: Donna Rotunno, tinyurl.com/metoo-dr

and left me shattered at 15. In the process of sharing I began to understand that each of our stories matter, and what we experience as uncomfortable, violent or traumatic takes many forms. Many of them look nothing like the kind of harassment and assault we have been conditioned to believe are the only ones.

Because of the story's familiarity, it was blasted for taking #MeToo too far. Op-eds in the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic* labeled it as just "bad sex" and "unpleasant moments." It was blasted because it exposes behavior that many people in our lives have probably engaged in, and that's why it's scary. It makes clear that this is a cultural problem; rather than blaming Ansari as an individual, our blame is with a society that does not care to teach people how to interact with each other in situations of intimacy.

Male dominance is cultural, and sexual violence is taught, not biological – which means we can end it.

Ansari is only one individual within a global culture in which women are not asked, not listened to, not believed, not respected, violently assaulted, and seen as objects. Across the world, from Argentina to Ethiopia to France, #MeToo described a world where women's bodies are not entirely ours, still seen by many men – however unconsciously – as theirs for the taking. We were finally talking – no, shouting – about all of it.

This sort of consciousness-raising is important because it can pave the way for mass action. While #MeToo started with elite women in Hollywood, soon McDonald's workers were striking and Google employees were walking out to protest harassment. It also raises our expectations of what is possible. #MeToo succeeded in ousting a handful of rich and famous men from their public positions of power, and ushered in a new era in which taking down an abusive boss or politician is actually possible.

From Anita Hill to Christine Blasey Ford

In 2018, Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh electrified the country. People were paying attention. I had never shared that many knowing looks or conversations with strangers about politics. The day that Kavanaugh was confirmed, the women in my life held each other.

Because we lived in a post #MeToo world, some of us thought that 2018 would be different than 1991, when Anita Hill brought charges of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas. The climate was unmistak-



ably different. Hill's hearings were notoriously mishandled by the all-white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee, and she sat through pointed attacks. In 2018, Brett Kavanaugh seemed to innately understand the sea-change he was witnessing – and he lashed out against it, yelling, spit-flying, eyes furious.

It was no wonder that #MeToo started in the workplace.

Yet the outcome is not that different: another sexual assaulter now sits on a court that holds unbelievable power over women's lives in the US. Despite #MeToo and the historic women's marches, Trump – the perfect embodiment of patriarchal culture – is still in office. And recently, presidential candidate Joe Biden – the man who chaired the committee who grilled Anita Hill, who participated in their demeaning questioning, and refused to call three witnesses – was hit with his own allegations.

Politician Lucy Flores came forward to describe how Joe Biden inappropriately touched her. A

second woman, Amy Lappos, told the Hartford Courant how Biden “put his hand around my neck and pulled me in to rub noses with me.” Photos of Biden touching women – who are clearly uncomfortable – have roamed the internet for years. Yet corporate politicians continue to defend Biden, attempting to draw a line between Biden's “affectionate behavior” and “real” sexual harassment.

Normalizing Biden's behavior, however, undermines an important lesson of #MeToo: that every unwanted touch, no matter how small, is part of the same sexist culture – one that so many of us participate in. Weinstein's abuse, Ansari's pressuring, and Biden's unwanted kiss exist as cultural practices under one patriarchal umbrella; they are all pillars in a world of male dominance. But male dominance is cultural, and sexual violence is taught, not biological – which means we can end it.

The Roots of Women's Oppression

To end gender violence, we need to know what creates and sustains it. Our daily experiences are continuously produced, or conditioned by,

material conditions. Material conditions refer to how we as human beings in a given society both produce what we need to live and reproduce ourselves as people. What kind of work is done? Who does it?

Under capitalism, at the jobs most of us go to each day, owners of the companies exploit the working class to extract surplus value (or, as they would call it, profit). This is the heart of capitalism. The working class is the key to capitalists' profit, and thus the key to how this system can be overthrown. The working class is a socio-economic group of workers, families, elders, and the unemployed who rely directly or indirectly on incomes from wage labor – or, as Tithi Bhattacharya puts it, “everyone in the producing class who has in their lifetime participated in the totality of reproduction of society.”

But wage labor requires that there be workers to exploit, and these workers must be somehow “reproduced.” That is, they must be fed, clothed, housed, and generally able to continue working (being exploited, as we would call it), and so must their children, and so on.

Capitalism could not exist without “social reproduction,” especially of its most crucial asset, labor. Yet it obscures, treats as irrelevant, devalues and dismisses this sort of work.

The labor required to reproduce the working class is borne disproportionately by women under capitalism. While men and women certainly took on different roles throughout history, this division of labor changed as capitalism overthrew previous ways of organizing society. In 16th and 17th century Europe, for example, the new economic system forced working-class men into waged work and initially excluded working-class women. Women were pushed into the reproductive work of the newly established nuclear family, just as this work became controlled and seen as inferior, unimportant, and invisible. This is a process that has continued to happen around the world through so-called “globalization.” And since the nuclear family remains an important place of social reproduction, capitalists have a vested interest in propping up compulsory heterosexuality and gender binaries, pillars of the family structure.

Women, and initially children, were also used as an additional reservoir of extra workers, used when needed by the capitalists and pushed back when unemployment was rising. As a marginal workforce, women were – and still are – paid

much less than men and treated as second-class workers, even as the reproductive work of the nuclear family still fell to them. And when more women started entering the waged workforce, it was no wonder that so-called “caring” jobs – those to do with the reproduction of the labor force, like teaching, cleaning, or nursing – fell to them.

Capitalism and the ruling class benefit spectacularly from this division of labor. The costs of reproducing the labor force – raising children, feeding families, clothing families, caring for the elderly and the sick, and emotionally tending to ourselves and others – are still offloaded onto women instead of the capitalists themselves. And of course, like our entire class, we're exploited in our second job, waged work, where we're not compensated for the value we create. Our bodies are used for the capitalists' profit, whether we're cleaning hotel rooms at our “real” job or raising future housekeepers at home.

We need a feminist movement that understands the full task ahead of us, and knows that the power to overthrow our current system lies with the working class.

The reason this sort of oppression works so well is because men do have power over women. Men benefit through material advantages, a feeling of superiority and access to women's bodies, and control over women at home, to make up for the control that most men lack as workers. Yet the power that working-class men have over women does not hold up to the power that the capitalists have over all of us. Working-class men are also harmed by patriarchal culture, even as they benefit. They are forced into a gender binary that represses their full emotional selves, and forced into accepting lower wages, since paying women less – some far less than others – brings all wages down.

This is strategic: capitalism uses sexism to divide us. It also instrumentalizes gender violence to keep us down as workers, and has done so throughout history. It was no wonder that #MeToo started in the workplace, that abusive men were abusive bosses, and that many stories of workplace harassment and assault featured men in positions of power coercing their female workers, many of whom have intersecting identities – immigrants, women of color, differently abled people – that make them even more vulnerable. As Alianza Nacional de Campesinas,

Women's March 2019. Photo: Lynn Friedman, Flickr, tinyurl.com/womens-march-19
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an organization of California farmworkers, wrote to the women of Hollywood in one of the first shows of solidarity: “even though we work in very different environments, we share a common experience of being preyed upon by individuals who have the power to hire, fire, blacklist and otherwise threaten our economic, physical and emotional security.” As long as people wield these positions of power over others, gender violence is not going anywhere. It is baked into capitalism and class society.

The material benefits from offloading social reproduction to women and the huge impact of a divide and rule policy – this is the root of our oppression as women. And we continue to be exploited in this way through a system of control in which violence and harassment play a central role. Gender violence is one way that capitalism ensures we’re kept in line.

Taking Back Control

Nothing short of revolution – of putting control over our bodies and production back into our own hands – will change this. Carceral responses that aim to lock up individuals, or solutions that focus solely on electing more women to political office, will not end gender violence. We need a feminist movement that understands the full task ahead of us, and knows that the power to overthrow our current system lies with the working class.

Leaving aside so-called “social” issues such as sexual harassment accepts the divisions that the ruling class uses against us.

When asked what would make things better, housekeeper Juana Melara responded, “It could help us a lot if more hotels have unions because the workloads are less where the workplace has unions.

The workload is a big part of this because you are always in such a rush trying to finish your job and do a good job that you don’t pay attention to what goes around.” Unions can help protect workers from assault from customers, co-workers, and bosses as workers claim more and more control over their workplace and working conditions.

Unions, just like other working-class or left organizations, are not automatically free from patriarchal culture. We need to demand that

these organizations fight against this internally. Our organizations need to educate all members and understand how women and people of color are differentially impacted by capitalism. We need to create processes of investigating sexual assault and harassment that do not diminish or re-traumatize survivors, but that take a restorative approach. We also need to educate, push back against, and in some cases simply stop men who believe they can get away with using the position of power capitalism offers them.

But these organizations also need to fight outwardly; they need to build a movement around legal, cultural, and economic demands that address gender violence and oppression. Most unions did not take up the #MeToo movement and mobilize workers. This was not just a betrayal, it was a missed opportunity – unions could have waged a nationwide campaign against sexual harassment. The McDonald’s strike and Google walkout could have been multiplied across the world.

They still can be. As socialists, we have a key role to play in ensuring that our leftist and working-class organizations take up the fight against gender violence. Many demands to protect people from sexual violence are demands that will raise conditions for the entire working class, like affordable housing, which can protect people from getting stuck in abusive situations. Medicare for all, free contraception, and mandatory sex education in schools benefit the working class as a whole, not just women.

But many unions and socialists make the mistake of needing to fight united as a class by minimizing our demands to only narrow economic issues that affect all workers, in order not “to divide the working class between men and women.”

In reality, leaving aside so-called “social” issues such as sexual harassment accepts the divisions that the ruling class uses against us. Only by taking up all aspects of working-class people’s lives will we be able to achieve unity in struggle. Besides, drawing a line between “economic” and “social” or “cultural” issues misses that our social and cultural world is shaped by the dominant economic sphere of wage labor – within the totality of capitalism, we cannot separate them from each other.

So we must fight as fiercely to end workplace harassment as we do for affordable housing. We must fight to create independent methods of inves-

tigating sexual assault that centers survivors’ needs, on college campuses as well as in workplaces. These investigations should be restorative instead of punitive; we should aim to repair harm and rebuild trust on survivor’s terms. We should ban mandatory arbitration for harassment allegations, and go further by taking the investigative process into our own hands. We could set up independent bodies for our workplaces, schools, and communities, completely run by organized workers.

As we fight for all this, we must re-imagine how we can organize ourselves and our communities. Fighting for free abortion on demand and 24-hour, free, community-run childcare, while immediately necessary, also helps us do this.

We can build a working-class movement that understands that ending patriarchal culture is nothing less than a revolutionary task, but that fights at every step to get there.

We have many tools to do the seemingly impossible. In the 1970s, abortion speak-outs and grassroots activism were powerful enough to force the conservative Supreme Court, under President Nixon, to pass *Roe v. Wade*. This followed a period of global revolt, including the civil rights movement, the Black Panthers, the general strike in France of 1968, and anti-colonial movements. We can learn from all of these movements as we rebuild one today.

We can build a working-class movement that understands that ending patriarchal culture is nothing less than a revolutionary task, but that fights at every step to get there. We can build a movement that holds everyone accountable, but allows us room to grow. We can build a movement that seriously examines how and why capitalism treats us differently, and the trauma and pain it has inflicted on our bodies for centuries. And as we do, we must continue the consciousness-raising project that #MeToo started – continue to shout, every day, about the violence of the society we live in. Only then can we begin the healing process of building a working-class, multi-ethnic, and multi-gender revolutionary force.



Into the Streets

The first Women’s March was the biggest expression of the resistance to Trump and the sexism pervasive in society. According to political scientists from the Universities of Connecticut and Denver, it was the biggest single-day protest in U.S. history. But many of the individual marches were politically dominated by liberal forces tied to the Democratic party that has been unable or unwilling to channel women’s visceral anger into tangible change that would have a direct impact on women’s lives. Since then, the corporate media has waged a fierce campaign to discredit the Women’s Marches.

But these marches opened something up in people that can’t just be contained again. Socialists, organized in DSA, should contribute to organizing the next women’s marches, to point the way forward with clear demands.

Our marches must be inclusive of all people. The corporate media made up a scandal of anti-semitism, splitting the movement at the exact moment that we all needed each other most. The Women’s March can be a safe place for Jewish people facing an onslaught of antisemitism, and of Muslim people who have faced the brunt of racist and xenophobic attacks for decades, escalating with Trump in office. The majority of all women, trans, and non-binary people, and a huge proportion of men want to march together: to close the gender and race wage gaps, for free and universal childcare, to end sexual harassment, and for full reproductive justice. The establishment has failed us; it’s time for the revolutionary and progressive left to lead the way.

Anya Mae Lemlich is a food service worker and a socialist feminist activist in DSA.

Lean in or Rise up?



BY ANYA MAE LEMLICH AND STEPHAN KIMMERLE, NOVEMBER 10, 2019

Book Review | Feminism for the 99%

Feminism for the 99% came out in February 2019, at the height of the #MeToo movement, and was listed as one of Vogue's "Most Anticipated Books of 2019." Cinzia Arruzza, Nancy Fraser, and Tithi Bhattacharya argue for a working-class feminism which is "anticapitalist, eco-socialist, and anti-racist." It's a much needed contribution to the developing feminist movement and its socialist wing, and presents its case with what we see as four main strengths and three areas of weakness. First the strengths:

1. It Pushes the Feminist Movement to the Left

One of the strongest contributions of the authors of *Feminism for the 99%*, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, is their bracing take-down of liberal, corporate feminism, or what they call "equal-opportunity domination." The academic-activist authors present the global feminist movement at a crossroads, where one path is the type of feminism that sees itself "as a handmaiden of capitalism," (p. 2) which prioritizes a few women reaching the top of the social ladder only to continue to oppress the majority of the world's population.

The authors recognize the revitalized feminist political moment we are in, as well as the importance of correcting course away from liberal feminism. The global feminist movement is on the rise, from militant feminist strikes to fights for abortion rights to the outcry of #MeToo in dozens of countries. In the US, the women's marches against Trump re-ignited and widened the feminist movement, but they remained tied to the dominant ideology of liberalism, closely aligned with the corporate Democratic party.

As organizers and supporters of the International Women's Strike and self-identified Marxists, the authors argue for a different kind of feminism: one that is anti-capitalist, internationalist and anti-racist. They do this through a series of 11 theses.

2. Anti-capitalism

One of the authors' brilliant moves is to argue convincingly that the varied oppressions that people face in our society are all grounded in capitalism. Thesis #8 argues that capitalism is built on racial and colonial violence, which it continues to prop up in order to sustain itself. It also points out the historic racism embedded in liberal feminism, and that racism serves as a useful tool for misogyny. In thesis #9, they argue that it is capitalism, not just human activity, that is destroying our planet.

Thesis #5 deals with gender oppression under capitalism. Locating the oppression of women in social reproduction, the authors argue that the work of "people-making" under capitalism was both assigned to women (reinforcing gender roles) and subordinated to the making of profit. By making clear the hidden but necessary labor that social reproduction provides for capitalism and its productive sphere, the authors aim to prove that these non-economic spheres are also sites of struggle.

The authors understand capitalism as what Marx would call a "totality," as "not just an economic system, but something larger: an institutionalized social order that also encompasses the apparently 'non-economic' relations and practices that sustain the official economy" (p. 64). The deeper contradictions in our society, then, are not limited to the capitalist economy, but take place throughout capitalist society as a whole.

In attacking this totality, the authors call for a class-struggle approach. One of the authors, Tithi Bhattacharya, refers to "feminism for the 99 percent" as "class-struggle feminism." The authors expand "class struggle" outside of the so-called traditional battles over wages and economic gains. They reaffirm that struggles over social reproduction (housing, free transit, universal health care, etc.) are class-struggle approaches.

3. A Strategic Focus on the Strike

The new feminist strike is one such class-struggle approach. Inspired by the feminist strikes in Spain, Argentina, and elsewhere, the authors see the reinvention of the strike as the "key innovation of the current movement."

Given the bureaucratic, conservative approach of most labor leaders, this is a welcome wake-up call, not only to rebuild labor militancy but also to use the power of strikes to fight for all types of working-class issues, not just economic, but against oppression in any form. The movement's repopularization of the strike and challenging of a narrow conception of who can strike is a positive development. After all, strikes are the working class's most powerful weapon. For instance, in Poland, the 2018 feminist strike succeeded in defeating a bill that would have made abortion completely illegal.

The authors say: "Withholding not only waged work, but also the unwaged work of social reproduction, they have disclosed the latter's indispensable role in capitalist society. Making visible women's power, they have challenged labor unions' claim to 'own' the strike."

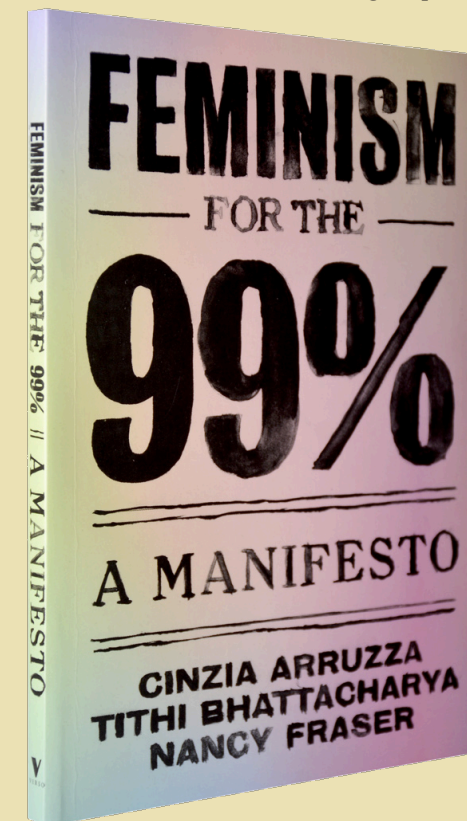
The 2018 feminist strikes in Spain and Argentina raised consciousness, expectations

and organizing abilities. These sorts of "protest strikes" or "strikes as demonstrations" are important because they help make visible our common and collective oppression. They push back against the idea that it is we as individuals, not society, who are responsible for our misery. Participants in mass strikes feel the strength of their numbers, which can then pave the way for further mass action.

Still, to understand where the working class's most potent power lies, it makes sense from a strategic point of view to differentiate between strikes of waged workers and those in unwaged social reproduction. Strikes of waged workers wield more economic power by hitting the profits of individual capitalists. Generally, strikes in waged workplaces point to the fact that the working class produces all the wealth, can interrupt the system of profit production, and – in the end – can take over production without the bosses.

This is not an argument to belittle strikes of unwaged social reproduction workers or to neglect the power they have. It is an argument to be aware of the power structure of capitalist society and to build working-class and feminist power strategically so we can build a movement to take over society and end oppression.

We should work not only to build strikes outside of the waged workplace, but also to reignite strikes within the waged workplace. This will build militancy beyond the approach of conservative labor leaders and also take up non-economic demands. Given that the global working class is majority female and people of color, economic power in workplaces can be used to move the whole labor movement into struggle against issues such as the gender pay gap, sexual harassment at workplaces and in society at-large, and the oppression of people of color,



4. A Rejection of an Economistic Approach

Feminism for the 99% states: “Too many sections of the left still fall back on the old formula holding that what unites us is an abstract and homogeneous notion of class, and that feminism and anti-racism can only divide us.” Instead of an identity-politics approach that all too often counters class-reductionism with class deprioritization, the authors argue for an expansive view of class and class struggle. This is one of the biggest contributions of *Feminism for the 99%*.

The working class is not, and was never, primarily white and male, nor is it homogeneous. As they say, the “global working class comprises billions of women, immigrants, and people of color.” It is multi-faceted and made up of people with diverse identities.

Capitalism uses our heterogeneity to divide us. The way to unify the working class, is not to ignore these differences. Rather, the authors argue, we need to take these differences seriously and build solidarity together. We can build this unity by both acknowledging divisions, waging a struggle against oppression, recognizing its roots in class society, and fighting “against capitalism’s weaponization of our differences.”

Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser and their co-authors triggered a much needed international debate around these questions. Within these discussions, we will make three main critiques of *Feminism for the 99%*:

1. Anti-capitalist Feminism Needs to Develop a Socialist Alternative

The authors, who all identify as Marxists, present their feminist Manifesto in the tradition of the Communist Manifesto. Unfortunately, unlike Marx and Engels, they do not explicitly argue for a socialist society. While brilliantly deriding capitalism for the mess it has caused, they do not present a thorough alternative vision for the society we’re fighting for.

Capitalism is what Marx and Engels called a “mode of production,” an economic system which shapes the whole of society. How we produce goods and services is the economic foundation of society, but capitalism is much more than that; it is a “totality.” We need to talk about a vision for a completely different mode of

how humans should produce and reproduce society – a socialist vision of liberation and reorganization of society.

Of course, like the authors, we do not expect to have a road map or ideal utopia laid out for us ahead of time. But socialist feminists should go beyond just “anti-capitalist” organizing and lay out an idea of a socialist feminist future: one that includes democratic, working-class control over the means of production (the large corporations, raw materials, supply chains, energy production, etc.)

A socialist vision must also include the need to revolutionize how society organizes social reproduction. Socially necessary tasks need to be drawn into the public sphere and taken out of the private sphere of the nuclear family which reproduces patriarchy. This can be done by developing universal social services: high-quality childcare, elder-care, healthcare, paid parental leave, cheap and accessible high quality restaurants and food, etc. All this will lay the foundation for the development of a radically different culture, one that is democratic, egalitarian, solidaristic, feminist, and anti-racist.

2. Its Strategy to Achieve Change Falls a Bit Short

The main strategy put forward in *Feminism for the 99%* is for all radical movements to join together in a common anti-capitalist insurgency, and for these movements to create alliances.

While this is certainly positive, this strategy is incomplete. What’s missing is a call for the self-organization of the working class. To that end we argue for the working class to create a political party of its own, rooted in workplaces and neighborhoods, armed with Marxist ideas to change the world. Workers and oppressed groups need our own party to build up our power, flex our muscles by winning fights for reforms through militant strike action and other forms of mass action, and we need to link these struggles to eventually taking power ourselves.

We agree with the broad definition of the working class that the authors present – a working class that is heterogeneous and varied that includes not only currently employed waged workers but also their families, communities, unwaged workers, and unemployed workers, or in Marx’s terms, “the reserve army of labor.”

The working class is only powerful when we act together. A working-class party unified not on the basis of glossing over differences but by fighting for the entire class on all of our issues (not just economic issues) is how we self-organize and start to build our power.

3. It Doesn’t Deal with Identity Politics

The authors do not explicitly engage with “identity politics.” Instead, they present two strands of politics to differentiate themselves from – liberal feminism on the right and class-reductionism on the left. But radical versions of identity politics are dominant today among left-wing feminists. This needs to be addressed by Marxist feminists.

Identity politics have come to take on different meanings for different people. We use the term to describe theories of fighting oppression that are not only based around identity but are not linked to an overarching socialist program for change; that tend to prioritize identity over political content; and do not view the working class as the decisive agent for revolutionary change.

Capitalism uses differences in identity to divide the working class, and a danger with identity politics is that it can reinforce and deepen these divisions. Like the authors, we should be clear that it is capitalism that divides us. We must identify capitalism as the enemy, while recognizing, as the authors do, that capitalism relies on and promotes racism, sexism and homophobia within the working class. Fighting solely along lines of identity and reducing each other to “allies” in our different struggles will not lead to the kind of broad working-class struggle and power that we need to overthrow the ruling elite.

This understanding does not diminish the deep divisions of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia within the working class, nor the success with which the ruling class has used these oppressions to divide us. It also does not imply in any way that the struggles against the oppression of women, LGBT+ people, or people of color have to wait until a unified working class confronts these issues. Out of these battles, together with the power of the labor movement, socialist feminists can argue to build unifying struggles, movements and organizations.

We agree with the authors that the working class must acknowledge these differences, take

them seriously, and act in solidarity. But it will take more than that. Instead of prettifying the work, we need to confront the real challenges and divisions we face. Bringing our struggles together will not happen automatically. We need to argue for a conscious approach.

Building solidarity will require struggle and debate within working-class organizations. The dominant ideas in movements are always contested. In the women’s movement, as *Feminism for the 99%* highlights, liberal ideas, which are limited to working within the framework of capitalism, compete with socialist ideas, which aim to put an end to capitalism. Similarly, socialist politics and identity politics also compete with one another. Identity politics currently dominate the left, and, to their credit, these ideas have contributed to leading a new generation into waves of social struggle. But at the same time, identity politics too often point toward the fragmentation of struggles and efforts to organize.

That is why we need to build a conscious political force, our own political party, with a leadership that systematically fights for a unified socialist feminist program both within the feminist movement and in the struggles of workers and all the oppressed.

The demands among different sections of the working class will not always be the same. To develop solidarity between these different struggles requires a socialist party that is actively involved in each of these battles that can bring together their varied experiences. Such a generalized political undertaking – a common political party fighting for leadership in the working class – allows for socialists involved in different movements to develop a common strategy and demands.

Read the Book and Join the Socialist Feminist Struggle

Feminism for the 99% is a welcome contribution to the global feminist movement which adds to the debate about how to resist oppression and exploitation. Its strength lies in its unbending wrath toward liberal feminism and its wider understanding of capitalism as the root source of oppression.

It is a call not to “lean in” but to rise up!

A Call to Action for Trans Rights



BY SPENCER MANN AND ROSEMARY DODD

@BICOASTALLEFTY, @MARXIST_BARBIE

For a DSA Response to the Wave of Anti-Trans Bills that Turns the Fight for Trans Liberation into an Essential Part of Our Broader Struggles for Workers' Rights, Medicare for All, and Socialist Feminism

2022 has seen an unprecedented wave of anti-trans legislation. Most high-profile was the grotesque directive issued by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, instructing the state's Department of Family and Protective Services to characterize gender-affirming health-care for trans youth as "child abuse." This directive targets not only trans children, but also the parents, teachers, and medical workers who seek to support them.

More recently, Alabama too passed an unprecedented law that makes it a felony for medical professionals to provide gender-affirming care to trans youth. This care is safe, medically necessary, and frequently life-saving. Anyone breaking these laws could face 10 years in prison and a \$15,000 fine.

The situation for trans people is dire all across the country, and most anti-trans bills have flown under the radar of mainstream coverage. In the first three months of 2022, state lawmakers

have proposed 238 anti-LGBTQ bills, with a staggering 154 of these targeting trans people specifically. For comparison, in all of 2018, only 41 anti-LGBTQ bills were filed in state legislatures.

Regardless of some backwards beliefs among the public, the push for anti-trans legislation is coming from above, not below.

Furthermore, this year's numbers dwarf those of 2021, itself a record year for anti-trans legislation, when 191 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced, 80 percent of which were anti-trans. These bills prevent trans people from participating in athletics, using gender appropriate bathrooms, prohibit trans issues from being discussed in schools, allow workplace discrimination, and even cut off access to health-care. Many of these bills target children under the guise of protecting them.

Hate from Below or Above?

But why the sudden onslaught of anti-trans laws? Research shows that while the

frequency of these bills have hit record highs, so has support for queer people among the general public. One poll found that 79 percent of Americans support anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ people in jobs and housing (PRRI, March 17, 2022). According to another poll, 62 percent of Americans say they have become more supportive of trans rights compared to five years ago, compared to 25 percent who have become more opposed (PRRI, June 11, 2019). Two-thirds of Americans, including a majority of Republicans, say they are against laws that would limit transgender rights, a poll found (PBS/NPR/Marist, April 2021).

This isn't to prettify the issue.

Despite the fact that support for trans people is on the rise, it is still far lower than it needs to be. Trans people still face an onslaught of discrimination daily not just from the state, but from peers, coworkers, bosses, and community members.

Safety is also a major issue. Transgender people are over four times more likely to experience violent crime (including assault and sexual violence) when compared to cisgender people.

One flash point has been sports participation; only 34



Trans Day of Visibility on March 31 in Portland, Oregon

Photo: Sierra Romesburg

percent of Americans say that trans athletes should be able to compete on teams that correspond to their gender identities according to Gallup (May 26, 2021). However, consciousness isn't set in stone, and a nationwide movement for trans rights as well as increased visibility of trans people could do much to reverse discriminatory beliefs.

Regardless of some backwards beliefs among the public, it's clear that the push for anti-trans legislation is coming from above, not below.

Right-wing lawmakers are catering to extreme religious groups and their hardened bases. In the era of Biden, social issues like trans rights are being wielded to spur polarization and give Republican state officials a scapegoat for the declining living condi-

tions of the working class, allowing them to do nothing to address stagnating wages or provide social services. In the wake of the ongoing surge in labor action and solidarity, the ruling class and those aligned with the interests of capital are wielding race and gender identity as a tactic to divide and disempower workers.

President Biden has actually been more vocal in supporting transgender people than the Democratic Party has historically been. He condemned the Texas directive and appointed Rachel Levine as assistant secretary for health, the first openly trans federal official confirmed by the Senate. He also signed an executive action expanding non-discrimination protection to include gender identity.

Rhetorical support does not overshadow the Democrats' refusal to embrace trans-inclusive Medicare for All and affordable housing.

However, rhetorical support and appointing trans officials, while a good step, does not overshadow Biden and the Democrats' refusal to embrace trans-inclusive Medicare for All and affordable housing that would truly make a difference in the lives of all marginalized people. In order to accomplish those aims, we will need more than a liberal capitalist orientation towards trans rights. We need a nationwide, socialist

mass movement struggle for trans liberation.

Socialist Feminism and Bodily Autonomy

It's not a coincidence that laws targeting trans people are ticking up at the same time as anti-abortion legislation and the likely overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*. Bodily autonomy is fundamentally incompatible with capitalism, which relies on traditional families raising the next generation of obedient laborers as its source of social reproduction. Not only are anti-trans and anti-abortion laws similar in that they seek to control people's bodies, a significant number of trans and queer people need abortion care and often have far less access to it than others, a fact that is often left out of mainstream discourse.

The feminist and abortion rights movements, both in the past and today, have not always been friendly to trans rights. The fact remains that it is absolutely essential that we build a socialist feminist movement that embraces ending all forms of discrimination that affect women and gender minorities, including racism and transphobia. Broadening our demands and rising in solidarity with our trans siblings doesn't diminish the fight for abortion rights, but rather strengthens the base of the movement to bring in wider swathes of society.

The fight for Medicare for All should embrace free abortion services and comprehensive gender-affirming healthcare. Trans people face a myriad of obstacles in the for-profit healthcare system, including prohibitive costs, a lack of trained doctors, and require-

ments to prove to psychologists that they are "really trans" in order to get care. Combining these issues with a campaign for universal healthcare is an example of how anti-oppression activism on issues that impact a minority of the working class can strengthen and broaden demands that help everyone, while building working class, socialist power in the process.

What DSA Can Do

In response to the onslaught of anti-trans bills, a group of DSA organizers across the country decided to host a call to organize events for Trans Day of Visibility on March 31. One such event that the authors of this article helped organize was put on by Portland DSA—a rally and march that brought together transgender housing, labor, and socialist organizers, and was attended by well over a hundred people.

While these events were mostly small, they can serve as a starting point for a national mass movement campaign for trans rights. Unfortunately, DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) did not help organize a coordinated response, which could have made the events much more wide-spread and provided materials and resources such as leaflets, unified political demands, and social media graphics.

However, it's not too late for a coordinated push from DSA on both trans rights and abortion access. Queer liberation is a major radicalizing force, especially for young people, and DSA members across the country would be eager to jump on an organizing drive that could help overcome the malaise that has plagued our organization during the Biden Administration. Such an effort could be housed in the

Medicare for All campaign, which could bring trans and abortion rights activists together with healthcare advocates.

DSA could organize a national day of action for trans rights with chapters participating all across the country, perhaps centered around Pride events this summer. Additionally, DSA could incorporate demands around trans rights and bodily autonomy into ongoing abortion rights protests.

Protests are a great way to raise awareness and bring new activists into the fold, but alone they are not sufficient, and would need to be combined with town halls, labor action, and class-struggle elections.

While it may seem like a stretch to get unions on board with a trans rights campaign, our event in Portland featuring transgender Unite Here and American Federation of Teachers organizers as speakers reveals that there is an opening to start making those connections. Starbucks workers, who are disproportionately young and left-leaning, might also embrace trans rights in their unionization work, providing a major opportunity for DSA to make connections and build the socialist movement.

Ultimately, DSA should put more resources into running pro-trans rights and trans independent socialist candidates for office at all levels who can use their positions to build movements demanding equality, worker control, housing, free healthcare, and expand the power of the socialist movement and the organization. In order to unite the multi-racial, gender diverse working class behind a socialist program, DSA must take serious strides to incorporate the fight for trans rights into every aspect of our work.

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Working While Trans

Trans people, particularly trans people of color, are among the most exploited members of the working class. Compared to their cisgender counterparts, trans people are twice as likely to be unemployed. An astounding 90 percent of trans workers report mistreatment or harassment on the job, and 47 percent of trans workers report adverse job outcomes such as being denied a promotion, passed over, or fired due to being trans.

In a capitalist society with a limited social safety net where people must work in order to survive, workplace discrimination can lead to homelessness and death. 22 percent of LGBTQ people and 30 percent of trans people report earning less than the federal poverty level of \$12,490 per year, as compared to 16 percent of cisgender straight people. The numbers are even worse for trans people of color, with 38 percent of Black trans people living in poverty.

Although the Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that the Civil Rights Act applies to discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, proving discrimination can be an onerous burden for workers. Organized workplaces and strong union contracts can provide an extra layer of protection for queer and trans workers.

Arsenia Reilly-Collins, a labor organizer interviewed for *Teen Vogue*, says that they've seen recent union contracts that include "protections around pronouns, anti-harassment language, non-discrimination, health and safety, [and] expansive health benefits to include trans benefits." Labor organizers and unions need to continue fighting for these types of benefits in order to sow the seeds for solidarity across the gender spectrum.

Historically, unions have a mixed record on queer rights, which is something that cannot be glossed over. Despite this, there are many historical examples of unions supporting the fight for protections from gender and sexuality based discrimination. In 1970, the American Federation of Teachers called for an end to anti-LGBTQ discrimination, and in 1977, the Teamsters union joined a boycott of Coors Brewing Company due to its racist, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-union stances, that was organized by queer activists. For the union movement to truly embrace trans liberation, rank and file workers need to have more control over their contracts and leadership.

Trans Day of Visibility on March 31 in Portland, Oregon
Photo: Sierra Romesburg



reform & revolution

A Marxist Caucus in DSA

The Reform & Revolution caucus of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) stands in the revolutionary socialist tradition which fights to end economic inequality, racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression.

The resurgence of socialist ideas and the explosive growth of DSA represent the biggest opportunity in decades to build a mass socialist movement in the United States. Our caucus stands for **building DSA into a mass socialist party** rooted in the struggles of the working class and the oppressed. We also seek to contribute to the construction of an **organized Marxist current** within DSA which is committed to **international socialism**.

Our publications strive to provide a forum for **lively debate** on the program and strategy that social movements need, drawing on lessons from past struggles.

We view the **capitalist system** – with its nonstop global competition for profits and power – as the main driver behind inequality, oppression, and the climate crisis. We stand for bringing the major corporations that dominate the economy into public ownership and replacing the anarchy of the market with democratic economic planning in order to meet the needs of people and the planet.

We advocate for a dramatic expansion of **democracy** in which all aspects of society – including our workplaces, neighborhoods and schools – are democratically run by popular assemblies and workers councils that are elected and subject to recall.

If you want to fight the billionaire class, if you want to resist all forms of oppression and fight for an eco-socialist world, join DSA at dsausa.org! If you want to find out more about joining the Reform & Revolution caucus of DSA, please email us at info@ReformAndRevolution.org

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