

# Women in the Class Struggle<sup>\*</sup>

by Lynn Beaton

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LAST WEEK, Workers Press published a history of International Women's Day. This week we continue our celebration of IWD with a tribute to some of the women who fought in some of the most solid attacks on capitalism around the world. Next week, we will conclude this a series of articles with an account of the work of women in Britain in the 1984/85 coal dispute.

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WOMEN'S direct contact with the effects of hunger and the suffering it causes has often created the spark that has set off revolutions. Last week we mentioned the bread riots which broke out in Russia on International Women's Day in 1917 and started the February Revolution.

The bread march of the women to Versailles and the subsequent storming of the palace of Louis XVI is well known and was the beginning of the insurrection in May 1789 which became the French Revolution.

Less than a hundred years later, the great- granddaughters of these women again demanded their right to bread and became the catalyst which started the Paris Commune.

The courage, aspiration and strength of the Communards has provided great inspiration to the world's struggling working classes. The brutality of its suppression is one of the most tragic events of our history.

Much of that courage and inspiration came from the women of the Commune who fought for its survival, organised for its continuation and struggled to plan a new society that would bring equality for all.

So brave, resourceful and dedicated were the women that the reactionary forces around the world found it necessary to single them out for condemnation. On May 19 1871, the Times said:

'If the French nation were composed only of French women, what a terrible nation it would be.'

The women were instrumental at the very beginning in neutralising the soldiers sent by the French government to squash the Commune.

They mingled with the soldiers, convincing many of them of the justice of their cause.

The resultant fraternisation with the Commune's National Guard allowed it to survive and become the example it has.

The women also built organisations to defend the Commune and to develop new ideas and solutions to social problems. There were many women's clubs and societies all with their own manifestoes and demands.

The Women's Union for the Defence of Paris and for Aid to the Wounded was one such organisation which boldly stated its aims in its first call to battle issued on April 11 as:

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<sup>\*</sup> From *Workers Press*, 15 March 1986.

‘Total social revolution, for the abolition of all privileges and forms of exploitation, for the replacement of the rule of Capital by the rule of Labour - in short, for the emancipation of the Working Class by the Working Class.’

As factory owners fled Paris, many workers introduced co-operative production. Women played an important part in formulating and partially implementing a series of progressive educational reforms intended to bring literacy to all Paris.

They took steps to institute a state-funded system of compulsory education, free of the influence of the church which offered a balanced education of humanities, sciences and useful technical training.

Girls’ education was given special attention as it had been the most neglected.

Women were encouraged to learn the skills that would find them employment and efforts were made to establish day nurseries near the factories.

A new sexual morality and ideas of women’s emancipation were being discussed everywhere at public meetings. Marriage came under strong condemnation and was seen as the enslavement of women.

A pension was decreed on April 10 to all widows and children of all citizens killed defending the rights of the people. It was stressed that this would be granted whether the children were legitimate or not.

When the Communards were eventually defeated, the women fought side by side with the men in the streets of Paris. The butchery of the troops was not spared the women, many of whom were seen to come into the streets, enraged by the brutality, and strike the officers who were shooting their menfolk.

The women were shot alongside the men. Their heroism so terrified the world’s ruling classes that a sort of hysteria about women incendiaries broke out, producing numerous articles and even some novels condemning the ‘inhuman’ acts of the women of the Paris Commune.

*But to the working class nil over the world, the women of the Paris Commune provided an example in the courage of their actions and the clarity of their ideas.*

Their spirit is carried into every working class struggle and their aims continued.

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IN ARGENTINA a unique campaign has been waged by the ‘Mothers of the Disappeared’ to recover their children from the Junta's prisons. They started by simply searching for their children but they ended up challenging not only the Junta and the armed forces but the present government as well.

The coup of 1976 unleashed one of the most brutal and repressive regimes that Latin America has experienced. It left 8,000 dead, 5,000 political prisoners and forced thousands into exile.

About 30,000 young Argentinians, mostly students and trade unionists are estimated to have disappeared.

Many of the disappeared were kidnapped from their homes and held in secret detention centres, refused all contact with the outside world and denied any legal trial.

The regime tried to deny these prisoners any legal existence at all.

The Mothers started as a secret organisation, distributing and printing newsheets and books of poems through the underground.

Their meetings were clandestine and they were laid open to enormous personal danger.

In December 1977, their first president, Azucena Villaflor, was kidnapped from her home by members of the armed forces and herself became one of the disappeared.

A few days later two French nuns were seized from a church where several families of the disappeared were holding a meeting.

The campaign quickly grew from its human rights orientation and it now attacks the political and economic projects of the military authorities.

It is opposed to any economic agreements with the IMF which would bring hunger and poverty to the Argentine people.

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BEFORE the Nicaraguan Revolution, the regime of Somoza was particularly brutal and corrupt. Women suffered particularly harsh conditions.

Somoza's National Guard had a brutal attitude towards women, often using rape as a means of terrorising the population.

There were parts of the country in which virtually all of the population had been raped.

Many women became involved in the FSLN; about 30 per cent of its fighters were women.

At first it was young women who joined the guerrillas but, as the revolution drew more support, more and more women became involved.

Women were often recruited by their sons and daughters or joined after their children had been tortured or murdered.

The Somozaists resisted to the last any changes in women's second-class status. FSLN guerilla commander Monica Baltodano had the responsibility of receiving the National Guard's surrender in the city of Granada, but the officer refused because he didn't want to surrender to a woman.

Since the Revolution, women have been a strong presence in the building of the new society.

They play a highly important role in the army, the police, the unions and the FSLN.

The Luisa Amanda Esponosa Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) organises women in all parts of the country.

Its view is that women must be integrated into all aspects of the revolution and it has focussed much of its energy on organising participating in the great literary crusade.

Before the Revolution, in some rural areas scarcely any of the women could read or write. Now sixty per cent of the volunteers working on the crusade are women.

AMNLAE also works in the militias and other national campaigns and has called on the new government to deal with the special problems which women face.

Many advances have been made. The new government has made a start in setting up several dozen day-care centres; it has built community kitchens and production co-operatives which will provide jobs for women.

The government has also made efforts to organise and protect women workers. The Ministry of Labour has a special project on the health of working women and pregnant women are entitled to 45 days off before giving birth and 45 days after.

The poverty of the country and the constant need to defend the Revolution against the US- funded Contras has meant that the gains have not been introduced as quickly as they might have.

Even so, the Nicaraguan revolution has provided a great contrast in its concern for the problems of Nicaraguan people with the capitalist governments around the world.