

Women's Fightback



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www.workersliberty.org/women

Student women are organising

By Esther Townsend, NCAFC Women's Committee (personal capacity)

The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) national conference took place in Liverpool on 28-29 January. Between 150 and 200 activists participated in debates, discussions and workshops.

The conference saw the largest turnout of women students and education workers of any NCAFC event yet. Women chaired discussions, led workshops and made speeches — reflecting our key role in the student struggles.

A session on “The legacy of Thatcher and fighting for women's liberation” led to a stimulating discussion on “Tory feminism” and the importance of organising as class struggle feminists.

Around 50 women attended the women's caucus, discussing how to improve representation in our unions, in the NCAFC and in the student movement as a whole.

Working-class women are being hit hardest by the Tory cuts and this is also true for student women. Women already take longer to pay off student debt due to career breaks and childcare. The hike in annual university tuition fees to £9,000 will make that worse — that's if we can get through the challenge posed by cuts to the Educa-

tion Maintenance Allowance.

We also face the gutting of subject areas where women students and workers are concentrated, and cuts to support services — ranging from childcare to the decent lighting and transport which make our campuses safe.

This comes alongside the Tory reactionary moralism: attacking sex education in our schools and sexual health support services in our universities and colleges.

The group NCAFC Women has been organising together formally since the establishment of NCAFC liberation officers last summer. We've begun networking local women's groups; organised a presence on the 9 November national student demo; and on 25 November participated in a day of action against violence to women.

However, as we face a new wave of attacks on education the need to build NCAFC Women as a strong, national campaign becomes more pressing. NCAFC conference passed a motion recognising this, and committing us to develop NCAFC Women as a vibrant campaign, based on anti-capitalist feminism.

We will make links with other local and national women's groups; support activists to build women's groups where they don't yet exist; campaign for women's officers, and other dedicated liberation officers, in every student

union; and seek to build a left opposition in NUS Women's Campaign.

We also aim to make links with women activists in UCU, Unison, NUT and other education unions.

We elected a women's committee who will be responsible for sparking and organising activity and representing NCAFC Women on the NCAFC national committee.

Taking inspiration from women's movements of the 1970s we intend to organise our activity around a Charter for Women in Education. We've begun to draw up this list of demands and ideas and will seek to develop it, alongside women's groups, in the

coming months. We hope that the Charter can be a tool to make links between women's groups, share ideas and skills, and support women activists to organise our fightback.

What you can do now:

- Get involved with NCAFC Women! We want to build a big and vibrant student women's campaign with supporters and activists across the country.

- Develop the Charter for Women in Education — we want the charter to reflect the ideas and experiences of as many women as possible. Organise a meeting of your women's group to discuss the draft charter (see box) and send your ideas to

ncafc.women@gmail.com or spark discussion on our blog.

- Invite us to visit you! We have women's committee members all over the UK so why not invite one of us to your women's group to discuss the situation facing women in education, how we can build NCAFC Women, the charter, and organising our fightback?

- Build links between the women's group and anti-cuts groups on campus, or set up a women's group within the anti-cuts group. Build links with women workers at your school, college or university — students and workers, unite and fight!

- Get involved in NUS Women's Campaign — the conference is 13-15 March and delegate elections are taking place in colleges and universities now. Run for delegate and work with NCAFC Women to transform NUS Women's Campaign into the democratic, fighting, class struggle feminist campaign that student women need.

Email: ncafc.women@gmail.com

Website: ncafcwomen.wordpress.com and anticuts.com/women

Facebook: National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts Women

A charter for women in education

This is a draft: ideas that could be used as demands and campaigning themes. Send comments and further ideas: ncafc.women@gmail.com.

- Support all those fighting sex and gender discrimination in our universities, schools and colleges.

- Fight the funding cuts, which will disproportionately affect subjects where women are concentrated. Fight for publicly owned universities with decent funding.

- Free education and a living grant for every student to

eliminate student debt.

- Support workers' fight to defend their pay, conditions and pensions — women will lose most from the Tory attacks.

- Defend and extend university and student union childcare provision.

- Defend sex education against the Tories' reactionary, moralistic agenda. Fight the religious takeover of parts of our school system. Defend and extend sexual health and reproductive rights services on campus.

- Fight for safety on campus: for decent lighting and transport,

stop the cuts to campus support workers.

- Eliminate poverty pay — a living wage for all workers on our campuses.

- A serious fight to make equal pay a reality in our universities and colleges.

- A woman's place is in her union — no to sexism in our student unions. Campaign for a women's officer and liberation officers in every student union. Fight to scrap men's officers wherever they exist.

- For a campaigning women's group on every campus.

RMT women's training

By Becky Crocker

As a minority in male-dominated workplaces, we've felt for a long time that women in RMT's London Transport region need to get organised.

January's RMT women's training event in London was the first step in that direction. It was organised by AWL members in the RMT alongside the Workers' Educational Association.

The day was a huge success. For many, it was the first union event they had attended.

In the first session we identified important issues for us: "sexist banter" at work, childcare, women's health issues forcing women out of employment. Many women told stories of being put-down for being outspoken and opinionated, accused of "overreacting" for standing up for themselves.

In the afternoon we heard the results of RMT's survey on sexism at work. Most women had responded saying there is a sexist culture in their workplace which management do not tackle. Examples of comments heard by women at work included: "the only place for a woman on the railway is the canteen", "Women are not technically minded and should stick to admin work" and "Women get pregnant to avoid working".

We followed this with a workshop to discuss different scenarios of sexism in the workplace. This gave rise to some great ideas for tackling sexism in the future. One was a pocket "know your rights" guide, full of insults to throw back at sexist men. We had fun sharing our favourite put-

downs. One of the delegates was immediately inspired to design a poster with the slogan, "sexism at work: it's no joke!", which should send out a message from every mess-room noticeboard.

When discussing how flirtation can blur into sexual harassment, one delegate, who is a union harassment officer, said management's harassment advisors increasingly pressure complainants to drop their case, making it more important than ever that all union reps can challenge harassment. Hopefully we can organise more training for reps on this.

The highlight of the day was hearing Louise Raw speak about the Bow Matchwomen's strike.

We were all spell-bound to hear how a group of confident women had faced down sexism and taken part in the first strike of mostly women workers in British trade union history.

Finding out that there is no festival to commemorate the strike, and that the 125th anniversary is next year, we decided to write a motion to take to our RMT Women's Conference. We wrote it in the class-room and one of us passed it through her branch the following day.

This course felt like the start of women becoming more confident and organised, and of making our presence felt in our own union. It was fun and inspiring to meet a group of assertive women who take no nonsense.

It's ironic to think that in a predominantly male union, which almost prides itself on its macho culture, the strongest members are probably the often-overlooked women.

Sex, violence and Stieg Larsson

By Hannah Thompson

The first volume of Stieg Larsson's thriller trilogy was originally titled *Men Who Hate Women*; in English translation, it was renamed *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

The third book was entitled *The Castle in the Air that Blew Up* and renamed *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*. The book cover showed a small, white woman lying on her front to display the dragon tattoo on her naked back.

The Swedish film of the same book chose to show the "girl" head-on, and the US re-adaptation has plastered London buses with Daniel Craig embracing her protectively.

The Hollywood film and Western title predictably remove much of the feminism of the book from the mainstream advertising, and the content of the film reflects this.

I would encourage you to read the book to get the best out of it, and while the US film is very beautiful and is able to spend more time on the story, I'd also recommend the Swedish film for retaining more of the politics.

But Larsson's politics are not complex. He draws very clear moral lines: men who hate women and men who don't hate women; corrupt, sexist government officials and honest, egalitarian government officials; lazy, corruptible police officers and hard-working, egalitarian police officers; bad capitalists and ethical capitalists.

Dickens had similar ideas about the rich and powerful, commending philanthropy over greed and cruelty. If only the world were run by ethical people, then we'd have no problems!

What makes Larsson's series groundbreaking is its huge success. In 2008 he was the bestselling novelist globally; which forced Hollywood to take notice, on the back of a heroine who breaks all the conventional rules. So much so, that the Hollywood adverts force the viewer to question whether the girl is heroine or monster in order to avoid sympathising with her entirely.

Larsson, however, ensures that Lisbeth Salander always has the reader's sympathy and attention.

Salander represents a lot of things: a promiscuous bisexual, autistic goth with a talent for computer hacking and a very clear set of ethics.

Throughout the series she is the victim of sexual violence, child abuse, state mismanagement, homophobia and media harassment.

She has supernatural elements to her: her photographic memory and her single-minded drive for revenge that make her a hot private investigator, and with enough determination to dig herself out of the grave.

She takes violent revenge upon her attackers using fire, sexual assault, torture, and concludes the series by nail-gunning a sex-trafficker's feet to the floor.

Jess McCabe writes in the *F-word*: "I have difficulty squaring Larsson's proclaimed distress at misogyny with his explicit descriptions of sexual violence."

Certainly the violence is extreme and explicit, but Larsson isn't inviting his readers to get off on it; he ensures the reader is in Salander's position throughout in order to feel the full horror of the ordeal.

Salander's revenge on her attacker is not only satisfying our collective blood-lust,

"The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" film poster

it is absolutely necessary in order to keep reading the book without your skin crawling.

From a broader perspective, Salander's character is right to defend herself; her actions do not alleviate male responsibility or negate the need for rape crisis centres.

McCabe does not mention Larsson's most progressive feminist politics: he is pro-sex. Bondage, threesomes, polyamory and promiscuity between consenting adults are celebrated, particularly the long-standing relationship between Berger and Blomkvist, who see each other with the consent of Berger's husband (this is not mentioned in any of the films).

Rape, torture and sex trafficking are clearly counterposed to these relationships. However, Larsson does not attempt to go into detail over the issue of sex-work; the investigative journalists use the Swedish law against clients of sex workers to track down traffickers and corrupt politicians using the highest echelons of government security forces.

Larsson's background was researching and exposing the far-right.

He published *Expo*, an anti-fascist anti-racist newspaper, and the book *Extrem*

Högem (Extreme Right) a more detailed account of his research.

He received threats of beatings or death from some of the violent neo-Nazis he exposed.

But with all his dedication to anti-fascism and anti-racism, Larsson barely touches on the subject in *Millennium*. One character in the second novel leads Larsson on a small rant about asylum and immigration controls, but he barely features in the plot and disappears with a few thousand euros half way through.

Larsson was a Trotskyist, though he dropped out of Trotskyist activity in the early 1990s.

After his death in 2004 it was discovered he had a will signed in 1977 (when he was 23) to the Swedish Communist Workers' League — now the Swedish Socialist Party — in his home town Umeå.

The will was declared invalid after his death and so the Millennium fortune passed to his brother and father.

However, Millennium is very soft-left on the issue of capitalism, pedalling ethical investment and legal justice for demonstrably corrupt billionaires.

• bitd.ly/wTflpb

Women's Fightback discussion meetings

By Esther Townsend

The year since we re-launched Women's Fightback has seen women at the heart of workers' strikes and student protests.

It's no surprise then that we've also seen a revival of feminist discussion and activism. Women's Fightback's focus has been women as part of the working class, fighting and shaping the class struggle. Following a successful class

struggle feminist conference and speaker tour in autumn 2011 Women's Fightback decided we weren't finished getting together with other women to discuss ideas, politics, and feminism.

So, we started a London discussion group. Our first meeting, with Maria Exall (LGBTQ and Communication Workers' Union activist) explored LGBTQ activism in the past and today; sexism and what it's like to be a woman in the LGBTQ movement; and

LGBTQ organising in our trade unions and workplaces.

Hannah McQuarrie (Union activist and body theorist) led our second discussion on "Muffs, Magazines and the Media" — from Slutwalk to Muff March, body image, body hair and social pressures are firmly back on the feminist agenda. Over 20 women came to share ideas, theories and personal stories. We considered how we relate to our bodies; and

where pressures come from — the media, our friends, or the structure of capitalist society?

Women's Fightback welcomes all self-defining women and we hope to create a space to talk about the issues that affect us and are important to us. Royal Holloway student and Feminist Society activist Sidonie said:

"I had never been to a meeting like this before but I liked it. I even spoke once (normally, I don't!) and people were encouraged to or-

ganise and lead future meetings, which felt welcoming. I liked the ways the topics were approached, the wine breaks and the food everyone brought. It was my first time, but after 15 minutes I'd forgotten that."

We thought of future topics ranging from sex work; to women in film; to women and the cuts.

More ideas always welcome — get in touch to join our discussion list. Email: women@workersliberty.org

Our next meeting is about Equal Pay with Cathy Nugent and Becky Crocker.

Suggested reading will be available on Facebook: Women's Fightback

For more details email: women@workersliberty.org

The danger in Dorries

By Beth Granter

In May 2011 I read about Tory MP Nadine Dorries' attack on

sex education via a private member's bill.

She was proposing that girls (yes, just the girls) be given "information and advice on the benefits of abstinence from sexual activity" as part of their sex education.

Let's quickly outline the glaring problems with this proposal:

1. Making abstinence education "just for girls" positions men as the gatekeepers of sex. It positions men as having no responsibility for decision making about sex, or for understanding consent. It also supports an idea of women having no desire, and men's desire being uncontrollable.

2. Existing Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in the UK is not statutory. That means that some schools, in particular academies, Free Schools and religious schools, are highly likely to not teach comprehensive SRE, because they disagree with the apparently "unsavoury" content.

Therefore, if this bill passed, these schools could end up teaching only abstinence, and the biology of reproduction in science classes, i.e., not the useful bits of SRE.

3. Abstinence education on its own doesn't work. It's been proven not to reduce STIs or pregnancy.

A review of American sex-abstinence programmes involving more than 15,000 people by Oxford University found that they do not stop risky sexual behaviour, or help in the prevention of unwanted pregnancy.

4. The bill is heteronormative, assuming that the only sex likely to happen is be-

tween a male and a female.

5. Comprehensive SRE already advises on the benefits of abstaining from sexual activity.

The more I read about Dorries, the more I learnt about her multiple attacks on women's rights. These include trying to make counselling for women seeking abortion compulsory (we apparently can't be trusted to decide for ourselves), and provided by religious anti-choice organisations, and trying repeatedly to reduce the time limit on abortions.

A few days after the first reading of her abstinence education bill, Dorries went on the Vanessa Show and claimed that "if more children were taught to 'just say no' there would be less sexual abuse". Seriously, she said that, on TV. This is blatant victim blaming.

Let's examine Dorries' motivations for a minute. It is clear to me that Dorries' attacks are founded on her capitalist, fundamentalist Christian, ideology.

First, her religion teaches her that sex outside of marriage is a sin — it's wrong and shameful. Knowledge about sex is also dangerous.

Her religion teaches her that abortion is immoral. Not only does that explain her direct and explicit attacks on abortion rights, but is relevant to this abstinence education bill, because she believes that abstinence education will reduce sex outside of marriage and therefore reduce unwanted pregnancies, therefore reducing abortions.

Second, her capitalist ideology relies heavily on the traditional idea of a nuclear family.

For the ruling class, the family is a vital social and economic institution.

It means married (heterosexual) women being stay-at-home mothers and carers whilst the husband goes out to work — that is, women providing unpaid labour.

Dorries believes that any sex outside of marriage will lead to either abortions or single mothers on benefits. And she certainly doesn't want the state to support either of those.

A major contradiction of capitalism, though, is that employers refuse to pay working class people a family living wage to one working parent as a sole breadwinner, forcing families into poverty and exploitative working conditions.

Dorries' proposals, and the actions of her party, have nothing to do with helping women. The Conservatives are responsible for pushing through cuts which disproportionately affect women:

- Since women represent 65 per cent of the public sector workforce, they will bear the brunt of the estimated 400,000 public sector job losses over the next four years.

- On average women working in the public sector earn almost 40 per cent more per hour than female employees in the private sector. So even if replacement jobs were available in the private sector (which they're not), it would represent a pay cut.

- Cuts to welfare will affect women twice as much as men because on average one fifth of women's income comes from welfare, while for men it is one tenth.

- £280 million of funding for a 10-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy has been scrapped.

- While one in five women is likely to suffer rape or sexual attack during their lifetime, Government cuts to domestic violence and rape crisis services average over 40%.

- Legal aid cuts will make women in violent relationships particularly vulnerable.

- Lone parents, 90 per cent of whom are female, will be hit hardest by the spending cuts, losing 18.5

Dorries protest, 20 January

per cent of their net household income.

We must fight each and every attack on our rights or they will be taken away from us.

Equality cannot be won under capitalism, but while we fight to change the system, we can't let the ruling class destroy what rights we have won so far. So, back to Dorries and her abstinence education bill...

Not finding any focused campaign against her newest attack, back in May, I decided to set up a Facebook campaign: Stop Dorries' abstinence for girls sex education bill. After a bit of tweeting, in two days the campaign had more than 500 supporters and climbed to more than 2,000.

We demonstrated against the bill on 20 January outside the Houses of Parliament.

The protest was supported by many groups including the Socialist Party, the British Humanist Association, Feminist Fightback, Abortion Rights UK, Queers Against the Cuts, Parents and Carers for Sex and Relationships Education, Education for Choice, the National Secular Society, Bristol Feminist Network, Left Front Art and Liberal Conspiracy.

Dorries withdrew her Bill on the day without it even being read. We announced this at the protest to cheers, but the issues it raised are still very much with us.

The SRE we have and the SRE we need

Feminist Fightback is conducting research about Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) and the effects of changing political structures on women's reproductive services and SRE resources. This text is taken from a recent leaflet.

It was clear from discussions of our experiences that provision was patchy — people got different amounts of SRE at different levels.

All of us felt we were missing the same things: discussion of sexuality; relationships; non-reproductive, nonheterosexual sex; self-pleasure; and, in some cases, any discussion of sex outside marriage.

The neglect of pleasure in SRE, or the "missing discourse of desire" has particular consequences for young women.

This is because they are already socially constructed as having lower levels of sexual desire and being able to experience sexual pleasure less easily than young men.

The image of women as passive recipients of active male desires is reinforced through curricula that mean that girls are taken off to learn about periods and sanitary towels while boys are free to ask questions about erections and wet dreams. Male orgasms are present in the curriculum, while female orgasms are not.

In this way, SRE fails to convey a sense of empowerment and entitlement to sexual pleasure for young women. At the same time,

for young men, although SRE is more likely to consider ideas around male sexual desire, it offers them limited ways of understanding their sexuality, as well as suggesting that male desire is almost uncontrollable.

As dominant expressions of male sexuality require young men to exercise power over women, such discourses limit alternative expressions of male sexualities.

SRE lessons are only one of the many sources that young people learn about sex and relationships with peers, TV/films, the internet and social media playing a much more prominent role. Without addressing erotics, SRE cannot contest ideas of "erotica" in mainstream pornography, which present often women as objects of male desire rather than subjects of their own.

What we would like to see, and what we are working towards, is a curriculum that: discusses sexuality and different kinds of relationships; considers the reasons why people choose to have sex; interrogates sex morality and taboos; confronts prejudices around female sexuality; provides opportunities for students to engage critically with societal myths and media messages about sexuality — including pornography.

It should also allow space for young people to set the agenda.

Full text: www.feministfightback.org.uk

Get involved: feminist.fightback@gmail.com

Sexual freedom and the right to decent healthcare

By Mary Jones

As a non-monogamous and non-straight woman I have faced and, in some ways, come to expect discrimination, comments and invasive questions about my life.

However, a recent visit to the GP's surgery brought back into sharp focus just how bad the reality is for LGBTQ people accessing health care and public services.

I have developed a sensible and pro-active attitude to sexual health, so went asking for "just an STI check-up", explaining that I

do it regularly regardless of current sexual activity.

The GP I saw decided that an appropriate reaction would be sheer incredulity, that a young woman could be responsible and in control of her health seemed to be impossible to her. However this quickly changed when the GP started to learn about my sexuality, suddenly I was no longer an astonishing example of responsibility but an irresponsible sexual health nightmare.

After years of cringing every time a GP asks if I use condoms before asking anything else about my sexual activity, I have taken the de-

cision to start challenging this. I had also taken the decision to start being more open with health care professionals about my sexuality. So when faced with the "condom question" I clearly informed her of the status of my two current relationships, but also challenged her not to presume that all relationships would be ones that use condoms.

Her response to this was to inform me "that all sexual encounters should use a condom as infection can be passed from penis to vagina". Clearly all memory of the fact that her patient had just informed her of regular sexual health checks

had been forgotten.

I patiently explained to her that I was referring to non-heterosexual relationships, although losing patience very fast.

With the benefit of hindsight the look of complete confusion on the GP's face at this time was pretty priceless, as she said "Oh, do lesbian women not use condoms?" The GP had never heard of dental dams.

As I wondered out loud what she advises even heterosexual couples about safe oral sex she exhibited the most stunning piece of homophobic behaviour so far by stating that "of course, one of them might

be bisexual and bring something from outside"!

She continued to patronise me about my relationship choices and express over-the-top concern about my polyamorous relationships. I was left with a feeling of complete exasperation and lack of faith in the health care system.

A Stonewall survey in 2008 found that half of LBT women have had negative experiences within a health care sector, and half are not out to their GP. There is a shocking deficit of training for GPs on LGBT sexual health, and the NHS refuses to recognise it as an issue.

Women should be allowed choice in their sexual health, and be respected for their decisions. GPs cannot provide adequate sexual health care whilst they remain either woefully ignorant or discriminatory. For women to be able to take control of their bodies and lives, we need to have the tools to do this, adequate sexual health provision being one of them.

Public services require far-reaching democratisation in order to sufficiently provide for us, be that keeping and expanding Citizens Advice Bureaus, or providing decent sexual health services.

31 years' work, 14 years' pension

Rita Ash, Tower Hamlets Unison branch chair, has been a union activist for most of her working life. She spent many of them ensuring that women who were affected by their exclusion from the pension scheme get a gratuity payment as compensation, even years after they left the service. Here she talks about the reality of pensions for many older women.

I got married in 1969 at 22 years of age. I was told that I could now pay the married woman's stamp.

This was cheaper than paying the single so many of us agreed to this. What no-one told us was that it would mean we didn't get a pension of our own. You relied on your husband's when he turned 65. At that time I worked on the telephone switchboard for the *Yorkshire Post* on Fleet Street as a temp.

I did that till I was six months pregnant with my first kid, and signed on at the labour exchange in Dodd Street. They got me a job as a packer in Brown's factory in Coburn Road. I enjoyed it so much I stayed beyond the time my maternity benefits started and lost two weeks of them.

I had two kids. My husband didn't want me to work while I was a mother. I think it was because his upbringing was hard and he put it down to his mum and dad not being there. But it drove me mad. I even worked for a couple of weeks without him knowing about it just to get out of the house.

My husband died at the age of 28. I was a widow, except that I was too young to get widow benefits. My husband hadn't been paying into his stamp for long enough for me to get anything. My kids were three and one years old. The only way I would have anything to live on was if I remarried or went out to work.

There was very little childcare then. Martin, the eldest, went to nursery in the mornings and Sally went to a play group. I took in home work, stitching trousers and shirts. I would make 12 pairs of trousers or 15 shirts for £5. I would sit at the machine

all morning, give the kids lunch, take Sally back to playgroup and work all afternoon. Then the kids would have to watch TV while I did the housework or, if friends had come round during the day, finish the sewing.

That was cash-in-hand. When both kids were in school I got a job as dinner lady at Saint Paul's Way school. That was in 1981. Of course, I wasn't paying the married woman's stamp then, it was full stamp so I got my full state pension. But I wasn't allowed to join the Local Government Pension Scheme because I was part-time. This was a rule that applied equally to men and women, but there were no part-time men. It was only women affected.

In 1994 they said we could join. I've been in it since 1994, 17.5 years but I will only get 14 years' pension because of my part-time hours. I've worked for local government for 31 years.

My friend, Jill, has been a cleaner all year round but part-time hours. She's been working as long as me but she'll only get 7.5 years' pension. She started out as a dinner lady, then became a cleaner as well. Two jobs. She's 59 now. She works from 6am to 6pm as cleaner and in the kitchens. Under the government proposals she will have to work until she is 63. If she retires at 60 she will lose 23% of her pension.

My son will have to work till he pops his clogs. I was shocked that Unison leadership are selling us up the river. We shouldn't be negotiating. We should be fighting.

The RBS bloke with his £1m bonus — he didn't even have to go into negotiations for that. How many MPs have been made redundant? How many MPs have had their pensions affected? How many MPs were denied the right to join a pension scheme?

I've had women crying to me: "All I'm getting is £3 a week state pension," because they took the married woman's stamp.

And then their work pension is only a tiny proportion of the years' service they've given to the borough.

Do we need more women MPs?

By H J McQuarrie

If we were to ask a school child to name a female politician, past or present, who do you think they would name?

As a feminist, and a socialist, I am saddened that the UK's most famous woman politician is Margaret Thatcher.

Furthermore, her legacy is such that this country is still marked by her two terms as Prime Minister, with dangerously conservative ideology taking grip once again on UK politics.

While there are many women involved in politics, most do not make it to Parliament. At present there are 145 female MPs compared to 505 male MPs. This means that only 22% of our MPs are the same gender as 52% of this country's population.

It's baffling. However, that isn't the only baffling statistic: out of our 650 MPs, only 28 are black or ethnic minority — that's 4%! And even though there are some MPs under the age of 30, the average age is 50, which highlights the ab-

sence of young people and their opinions from Parliament.

Criticising this country's decision makers is the easy part though. The problem that socialists, feminists and BME campaigners have so far struggled with is changing these statistics. We need a government that is truly representative.

The liberal feminist Fawcett Society has been running a campaign for many years now that calls for one in four MPs to be female.

We need 17 more women in government for this to be achieved, but what will that really achieve?

Will these women be able to empathise with the lived experiences of the women that they represent? I think that is quite unlikely.

Calling for more women to be present in Parliament will most likely only invite more politicians from elite universities, with little understanding of the struggle that most women have juggling work and family commitments, and juggling the costs of rent, bills, childcare, and transport to work to pay for it all.

Now I realise that news

of our government being predominantly white, male and middle aged is far from a ground-breaking revelation, and I realise that I am far from the first person to suggest that such liberal tactics as a call for quotas in official bodies do not work, so what is our alternative?

We need to encourage more working-class women to become politically active so that they can tackle Theresa May and Louise Mensch on their own turf.

There are major obstacles to women becoming more engaged in politics, such as less free time (often due to childcare), less disposable income (for literature and travel to meetings), and, due to socially encouraged gender differences, a tendency to be less vocal in debates and discussion. This is where our efforts as feminists must be focused.

It is our role to address not only women-specific problems, but also women-specific experiences of wider problems. Furthermore it is our responsibility to promote self-education and build confidence in public speaking and writ-

ing. Women and active in grassroots activism in their local communities is just as valuable — if not more so — than the women visible in Parliament.

Having more people of all backgrounds and identities campaigning is our first major step toward a government that is more representative of the majority of people living in this country — all gender identities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and sexualities.

Is there a need for quotas, such as the Fawcett Society's FMP campaign? Arguably, yes. Trade unions have women's, black members', occasionally young members', and low income members' chairs on their committees to ensure that diversity is encouraged. But these are supported by the ongoing campaigns of their respective self-organised groups.

A demand for 25% female representation in government must be supported by politically active women in the wider population. Now that's a campaign I'd get behind.

Thatcher was a class-fighter, not a bitch

By Jill Mountford

For many, Margaret Thatcher is an easy figure to hate, and rightly so.

The world economic crisis today has its roots in the neo-conservatism of Thatcher and her American counterpart, Ronald Reagan, back in the 1980s. Thatcher inflicted significant and lasting damage on the working class and our movement. She was a strong leader who knew exactly which side she was on. She never flinched from her duty of acting on behalf of the ruling class.

As a minister of the 1975 Tory Government and as Prime Minister for 11 years, Thatcher inflicted misery on working class women. She once said she did not identify with feminism. No kidding, sister!

Regardless of this, she had to fight sexism within her own party and the establishment to get to the top. And once at the top sexism took on different guises. She became the powerfully seductive "governess" for the sexually stymied boarding school educated men in her cabinet and wider milieu.

The mainstream media did not know how to portray Thatcher but the fact of her femaleness, her womanliness usually influenced how she was depicted. She "hected" rather than argued, she "waved her handbag" when driving points home, and so on.

The satirical puppet show "Spitting Image" was unable to come up with anything more imaginative than making Thatcher wear a suit, more male than any man in her cabinet, playing the dominatrix with highly sexual undertones to the pathetic drooling men around her. Perhaps this is all that can be expected from mainstream society where sexism and misogyny go unchallenged. But surely the labour movement and, the left in particular, fared better? Not so.

The broad labour movement used slogans such as "Ditch the Bitch" as comfortably as "Coal not Dole". A leading Labour Party woman made a "mad cow disease" joke about Thatcher at a Labour Party Women's conference and expected and got laughs and applause.

"Evil cow" was another

often used description for Thatcher, usually followed by a rhetorical question such as "what sort of woman could do...", followed by quips such as "If Denis (Thatcher) was a real man..."

On the revolutionary left, things were no better, maybe even worse. The Militant Tendency (forerunner to the Socialist Party) was notoriously bad on the question of fighting women's oppression and sexism. Leading Militant local organisers in Stoke introduced a song to a miners' support march: "Maggie Thatcher's got one, Ian MacGregor is one! Nah, nah, nah!" When challenged by women on the march, they laughed dismissively, playing to the more backward ideas of some striking miners present.

Socialist Organiser (forerunner to the Alliance for Workers' Liberty) and *Women's Fightback* were lone voices at the time arguing Thatcher should be taken on as a politician, as serious ruling class fighter, and not reduced to sexist abuse and caricatures.

Thatcher wasn't evil. She wasn't mad. She wasn't a

cow. She was a woman who fought hard for her class. If the likes of Neil Kinnock, then Labour Party leader, and Norman Willis, then General Secretary of the TUC, had fought with just a fraction of her commitment and vigour for the class they were chosen to represent, then history might have been different.

Socialist women have nothing in common with the likes of Margaret Thatcher. We should feel no sense of feminist solidarity with her and women like her. But we have to be concerned that women who take part in politics, whether we agree with them or not, cannot and should not be reduced to sexist and misogynist ridicule. Hate Thatcher and all she represents, but when Thatcher's dead her ideas and what she stood for will remain.

Her policies and legacy, which set working class women back decades, will still need to be fought, as will the sexism that undermines women's confidence and erodes our abilities in all spheres of life, not just politics.

Women's Fightback

Women's Fightback is a bimonthly socialist women's paper produced by members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

We believe women's oppression is rooted in class society, and can only be ended by overthrowing capitalism. At the same time, we do not tell women — or any oppressed group



— to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our job as reorienting the labour movement towards a fight for women's rights, and the women's movement towards class struggle.

Without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women's oppression. Without a mass movement of organised, mobilised women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution. Neither is possible without the other.

Workers' Liberty women are active in the fight to transform the labour movement, and in many different campaigns — from reproductive freedom to migrant rights to the struggle against cuts. If you're a socialist feminist, please consider joining us — and, in the meantime, write for and distribute Women's Fightback to help win the biggest possible audience for socialist feminist ideas.

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