

What Are We Fighting For?

Women Workers' Struggles

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During the last five years, we have witnessed a new feminist wave worldwide. Argentina broke out with the #NiUnaMenos movement in 2015, and three years later women painted the streets with green to demand the legalization of abortion. On the other side of the Atlantic, women were also taking to the streets for the right to abortion, both in Ireland, to achieve it after the struggles that led to the historic referendum in May 2018, and in Poland, to avoid losing it when it was under attack. The #MeToo movement went viral in the USA in 2018, at first as a movement limited to “celebrities” but which later spread to other areas of society, politicizing women and transforming them into one of the main groups mobilized against Donald Trump’s presidency. In a similar vein, the women’s movement began to grow in Brazil and become visible under the slogan #EleNão (not him), a reference to the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro. Italy experienced the most massive mobilizations of recent times in the celebration of the International Women’s Strike on 8 March and the revitalization of its historic feminist movement from the formation of the women’s platform *Non una di meno*. In Spain, 8 March also became the key date for a mass movement that placed the feminist debate on the national political agenda, making, for example, the women’s movement a central political actor against the extreme right-wing party Vox in Andalusia. Chile experienced a rise in the women’s movement that played a key role in the student struggles that sparked the massive demonstrations in 2019 which, as its own protagonists took care to say, were not “for thirty pesos” but for thirty years of neoliberalism. The expansive wave reached Southeast Asia, triggering a women’s movement for equal rights that, in the case of Indonesia, has led massive mobilizations against the “bus law” of labour precarization at the beginning of 2020.

This wave has different political and social contexts within which it has placed issues such as femicides and gender violence, reproductive rights, sexual freedoms, wage inequalities, and women’s social reproductive work at the centre of public debate. But the heterogeneous backgrounds and claims should not let us lose sight of an element that runs through the different local experiences and gives particular qualities to this new wave: the crisis of neoliberal capitalism starting in 2008 and its expression in austerity plans, an escalation of labour precariousness, increasing unemployment and poverty, and the emergence of extreme right-wing parties. The new feminist wave is part of the resistance movements that have risen in the heat of the crisis. As

Cinzia Arruzza points out, “The explosion of the feminist movement was, of course, preceded by other mobilizations, the season of struggles of 2011–2013 with international visibility (in particular Occupy, the Indignados, and Taksim Square), with which it presents some elements of continuity” (2018). Within this particular context, the women’s movement tends to lose its sectorial character and becomes a political phenomenon within each country hit by mobilizations, joining the plethora of social movements that fight against cuts, right wing governments, and authoritarian politics.

But there is another element that distinguishes this new feminist wave: the vital importance given to the work done by women in contemporary societies for the understanding of their oppression, that is, the role of women in social reproduction work. “If we strike out, the world stops” can be read among the slogans of 8 March. As the main instance of articulation of the movement at the international level, the International Women’s Strike (IWS), marks the centrality of this class aspect in the women’s movement and, at the same time, it marks the centrality of women in the class that makes the world go round. The IWS is the tool of women as current societies’ “essential workers” and as the working class’s key members.

In this article, I address the relationship between the rising women’s movement and the struggles of working women in the context of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, taking three considerations into account. First, the framework of social reproduction enables us to understand the leading role played by women in working-class struggles. Second, when we speak of social reproduction, we are not only referring to what happens in the household but what happens in thousands of workplaces where it is mainly women who carry out reproductive work (hospitals, schools, fast food chains, cleaning services, etc).⁷ The recognition of these two forms of social reproduction work (unpaid and waged) is fundamental for understanding the centrality of women in the contemporary morphology of the working class. Furthermore, it is critical because institutions of social reproduction have been one of the main focus points of neoliberal austerity plans worldwide. Third, this social reproduction approach allows us to bring to light how workers’ struggles go beyond economic demands and introduce claims that are being violently attacked by capital and the ruling class.

From this point of view, this article addresses four types of workplace struggles led by women: against gender violence, in favour of reproductive rights,

⁷ For a deeper understanding of social reproduction see Bhattacharya 2017 and Ferguson 2020. For a comparison between this understanding of social reproduction and an autonomist understanding, see Varela 2020.

for the defence of social reproduction services, and to keep working-class people safe from Covid-19.

“I’m Not on the Menu”

Dozens of women march together holding each other’s arms and on their taped mouths could be read the words #MeToo. They are not celebrities, they are McDonald’s workers. It is Tuesday, 18 September 2018, at the first strike against sexual harassment coordinated throughout ten cities in the USA. Their demands were: that the company creates an anti-sexual harassment committee (of women workers, corporate executives, franchise representatives, and leaders from national women’s groups), that it come good on its stated zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment, hold mandatory training sessions for managers and employees, and create a simple system for receiving and responding to complaints to protect workers from retaliation (Orleck 2018). “Low-wage workers often don’t have access to the media and lawyers that celebrities do”, Eve Cervantez⁸ said. “I appreciate that it’s difficult for celebrities to come forward, but I would say it’s much more difficult for low-wage workers to come forward because they don’t have a safety net” (Reyes-Velarde/Vives 2018). With this simple phrase, Cervantez brought to light a crucial fact: the profound relation between exploitation and sexual harassment, or, in other words, sexual harassment as a disciplinary mechanism of a deeply precarized, racialized, gendered, and migrant workforce.⁹ McDonald’s workers described sexual abuse, coercion, and harassment as everyday occurrences in the workplace,¹⁰ and described the retaliation they suffered in the form of verbal abuse, cuts in hours, and intentionally inconvenient rosters when they denounced the abuses. The same picture could have been given by one of *Las Kellys*¹¹ on the other side of the Atlantic in 2019. “Completely naked, he told me he’d pay me well if I stayed the night with him” (*la Sexta* 2019), said a hotel maid organized in the *Las Kellys* women’s collective during its campaign against sexual harassment in Spain. The campaign achieved such strength, par-

⁸ Eve Cervantez is an attorney representing the 10 women who filed charges with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in May 2018.

⁹ Latin women played a key role in the protests, in some cities the signs were written in English and Spanish: “McDonald’s: Enough, no more sexual harassment. Basta, no más acoso sexual.”

¹⁰ A survey by Hart Research Associates (2016) found that about 40 percent of women in the industry who experience sexual harassment feel forced to accept it because they can’t afford to lose their jobs, and that 1 in 5 women who report it were retaliated against.

¹¹ *Las Kellys* is an acronym of “*las que limpian*”, laskellys.wordpress.com/2017/02/25/equipo-de-investigacion/. See Georgina Cisquilla’s documentary (2018) and Martínez/Burgueño (2019).

ticularly in the five-star hotel chains in tourist towns along the Spanish coast, that it forced the union federation Workers' Commissions (CCOO, *Comisiones Obreras*) to take up the demand and address the issue of sexual harassment under the slogan "the customer is not always right".

There are many points in common between the strike at McDonald's in 2018 and the actions of *Las Kellys* in 2019: the systematic nature of sexual harassment in the workplace; the precarious nature of employment and working conditions; and, directly related to precariousness, the immigrant status of many of the workers. But there is a fourth component that is also relevant: the sort of organization that promotes the struggle on both sides of the Atlantic. The McDonald's Tuesday's Strike was voted for and conducted by the Women's Committee constituted by women workers in different areas of several cities.¹² In the case of *Las Kellys*, we also find a network created by women workers in different hotels in Spain, whose purpose is to fight for the demands of this precarious sector of the workforce. In other words, they are women workers' organizations that are built outside the unions but are based in the workplace, they discuss their needs as working women and in that experience they articulate together two things that unions often separate: labour demands and gender demands, which take the single form of "gendered working-class demands".

"I Learnt about Our Rights as Women within the Factory"

In the central hallway of the MadyGraf factory there is a sign that says "Sunday, July 22, Madygraf Wears Green: Women Leading the Fight for Legal Abortion and Against Austerity". Green is the colour of the struggle for the legalization of abortion in Argentina, and the sign calls for an all-women assembly in the factory to prepare for their participation in the 8 August demonstrations, the day the Senate would address the Law of Voluntary Pregnancy Interruption.¹³ MadyGraf¹⁴ is a print shop run by workers in Buenos Aires. The sign was discussed, voted on, and hung up by the company's women's committee, one of the pillars of the struggle that culminated in the occupation and reassuming production of the print shop. This militant women's committee has linked the struggle in the factory to the broader feminist struggle beyond its gates (Ar-

¹² The Women's Committee at workplace were formed after the McDonald's shareholder (annual) meeting in 2017. In some cases, the protests were supported by activists from Fight for 15, MeToo, Tenant's Unions, Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, and unions members.

¹³ The Senate voted against the law on that occasion. On 30 December 2020 it voted in favour and it was finally approved (editor's note).

¹⁴ Formerly the property of RR Donnelley, workers and their families occupied it in 2014, when the management decided to shut down.

ruzza/Varela 2019). The assembly on 22 July was attended by more than 700 workers from different workplaces around the northern area of Buenos Aires and by militants from the women's organization *Pan y Rosas*.¹⁵

As is well known, the debate for the legalization of abortion in Argentina shocked the entire country and was a turning point in the massive women's movement that developed around the slogan #NiUnaMenos by 2015.¹⁶ One of the most controversial roles was played by the head of the General Confederation of Labour (*Confederación General del Trabajo*, CGT),¹⁷ which gathers almost 100 percent of workers in the private sector. A few days before the bill was debated in the House of Deputies, some of the top leaders of the CGT signed an appeal entitled "Peronists for Life," which stated: "Abortion is a foreign element to the Justicialist worldview, which cannot be separated from the culture of discarding." On 4 July, the CGT published an official statement in which it announced that it would not take a position on abortion, but it alerted the national government to the economic problems legalization would bring to the health system managed by the unions, because it would increase the costs of the service. The statement was repudiated by women union leaders and by several sectors of the feminist movement.

The CGT's policy reinforced the boundary between "women's issues" and "working-class issues", strengthening the conception that abortion is a matter of personal choice and not an issue that, being a decision that has to be taken by women and pregnant bodies, directly concerns the reproductive conditions of the working class as a whole. In this context, the struggle of working women for the legalization of abortion in the workplace (particularly in the private sector) was carried out by the "militant minority" in each workplace: women's committees, feminist militants, and political activists.

"Save Our Schools"

A crowd is demonstrating in the park in front of the state Capitol in Charleston, West Virginia. Among the many signs that can be seen, there is one held up by a girl that reads: "Rosa Parks was not wrong, neither are my teachers." We are on one of the many marches that took place during the nine-day statewide wildcat strike carried out by West Virginia teachers, in what became known as the beginning of the Teacher's Spring, in 2018. The association between the iconic figure of Rosa Parks and the strike may seem exaggerated,

¹⁵ See www.laizquierdadiario.com/Pan-y-Rosas.

¹⁶ See niunamenos.org.ar/; Colectivo Ni Una Menos 2018; Rodriguez 2016.

¹⁷ The leaders of the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), a labour Confederation composed basically of state workers unions, positioned themselves in favour of legalizing abortion.

but as Tithi Bhattacharya (2018) describes in her reports from the scene, what is felt among the strikers is a feeling of kick-starting change in a situation of years of injustices that not only concern themselves as wage earners but also affect all those who depend on public education. The strike was carried out by thousands of teachers and public schools service personnel (bus drivers, cooks, custodians, secretaries), but involved thousands of other community members who actively supported it. Why?

A whole series of reasons can be found in Eric Blanc's book *Red State Revolt* (2019), but I would like to highlight the following three: (1) The very policy of the organizers of including demands that affect other workers, such as an increase in the budget for the PEIA (Public Employee Insurance Agency). One in seven West Virginians depend on PEIA. In this sense, the teacher's strike was a struggle in defence of the two great institutions of the formal economy of social reproduction: education and health. (2) The workplace decision-making organization. It allowed not only democratic decision-making with a school-by-school voting system, but also the possibility of turning the school into a strike operational base where, for example, the teachers, largely self-organized, could provide food for students who depend on free school meals. (3) The dual character of the school: as a wage-labour workplace and as a fundamental space for social reproduction. There, the "classic" demands of a strike (such as pay increases) are combined with deeply working-class demands such as quality education as well as the healthcare that the new generations of workers receive. That dual character of the school (as a workplace and a place of care) and the gendered dimension of the profession of teaching was expressed in how quickly wider sectors of the community were pulled into the strike. The teachers' strike became a struggle for the means and quality of working-class life-making and it showed the potential role of social reproductive workers (mostly women) as a bridge between workplaces and communities.

"Our Bodies Are on the Line"

The picture was circulated on social networks. Three nurses standing outside Mount Sinai Hospital in New York holding three signs: "Quality Health Care for All New Yorkers", "How Many of Us Must Die? #PPE Over Profit #Protect the Frontline" and the main one: "Capitalism: Do Not Resuscitate. Healthcare Workers for Socialism" (Kwon 2020). The woman who was holding the biggest sign is Tre Kwon, a New York City nurse, a rank-and-file member of the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA), and an editor of *Left Voice* journal. The demonstration was held on April 3, 2020, as part of a series of protests organized by nurses and other staff at various hospitals in NYC. "We formed this task force [Frontline Workers Task Force at Mount Sinai Hospital] because we saw that the whole saying of, you know, 'We're all in this together' that Cuomo,

Trump and other politicians and even CEOs are claiming, is totally bogus. We are the ones who have our bodies on the line. We are the ones who are putting our families at risk and ourselves at risk at our job. We're demanding attention now." (Goodman 2020).

Kwon's message highlighted two feelings that surfaced among various sectors of workers as the pandemic unfolded. On the one hand, while the dominant narrative talked about a virus affecting everyone, it was the workers who put their bodies on the "battlefield." On the other hand, despite the demagogic recognition of "essential workers", companies prioritized profit-making over workers' lives through a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and Covid-19 testing, extended working hours, increased nurse-to-patient ratios, no guarantee of paid leave in case of contagion, etc.

The exceptional nature of the pandemic brought to the debate two elements that are usually part of "the hidden abode of capital" (Marx): the contradiction between profit-making and working-class life-making, and the relevance of women in the "essential" work of social reproduction.

Workplaces as Catalysts, Women Workers as a Bridge

The struggles outlined above have some elements in common. The first and most obvious is that *they are led by women*. The second is that their claims exceed what is commonly understood as a labour struggle, including "extra-labour" demands such as the end of gender violence, the legalization of abortion, the defence of education and health institutions, and the prioritizing of life-making over profit-making. That is why, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, we talk about them as social reproduction struggles since they are related to crucial aspects of the conditions in which the working class carry out their social reproduction. Third, and very significant, these are *workplace struggles*. In some way, this challenges one of the most established commonplaces in labour studies but also in much of union leadership: that struggles at the workplace must be reduced to the fight for working conditions and wage compensation of the specific sector of workers hired in that specific workplace.

This understanding implies a double reduction: a biased perspective of the workplace and its disciplinary mechanisms (as we have seen, sexual harassment is part of the workplace's disciplinary procedures for a gendered workforce), but also a misunderstanding of the relation between what happens inside the workplace and outside it. It builds an insurmountable barrier between the spheres of production and reproduction, as if they were dichotomized fields for capital. These struggles led by women workers challenge this dichotomized comprehension of the class-war battlefield: the workplace is not taken as a sectorial space but as a powerful position (because of its power to

stop profit-making through coordinated workers' action) that could serve as a *catalyst* and strengthen the claims of the working class as a whole.

The neoliberal counter-reforms have shown that *the attacks on the working class have been in the realms of both production and reproduction*. The labour force's feminization in recent decades is a great example of this. As Kim Moody (2017) pointed out in his analysis of the way in which capital is "re-shaping the battleground of class war", the pauperization of the working class pushed women into some particular niches of the labour market: short-hour (and low-wage) jobs that allow them to continue doing unpaid social reproductive work in the household (especially for women with children). One of these niches is the social reproduction sector in the formal economy that has additionally been one of the main targets of neoliberal policies through privatization (transformation into commodity production) and austerity plans. Women workers are triple victims of neoliberal policies: as part of the working class as a whole because they have witnessed their working and living conditions plummet in the last 40 years; as those who mostly perform waged reproductive work, because they are at the centre of the attacks on public health and education services; and as those who mostly carry out unpaid social reproductive work because they have suffered an increase in their domestic work due to the fact that every school, nursery, aged-care home, and hospital that closes or is privatized means more work for women who cannot pay for those services in the market. In this sense, working-class women have a vivid experience of the deep connection between the realms of production and reproduction as the two targets of capital's attacks. This specific position of women within the working class is reflected in various ways in the new feminist wave and enables us to think of working women as bridges between production and reproduction. It even allows us to pose the question about workplaces as catalysts of struggles that raise not sectorial demands but claims related to fundamental needs for the working class's own life-making, as did the women who led the struggles reviewed above. Claims not only related to gender, but also to race, sexuality, and migration status.

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