

Feminist Movements in a Pandemic World – Towards a New Class Politics

Part of Class and Redistribution

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Rafał Milach, *The Archive of Public Protests* [series], 2018.
Warsaw, 08.03.2017, Protest against the tightening of anti-abortion law. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.



Rafał Milach, *The Archive of Public Protests* [series], 2018.
Warsaw, 04.10.2016, Protest against the tightening of anti-abortion law. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

In November 2020, Khitam Al-Saafin, the head of the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees, UPWC, was taken from her house in occupied Beitunia by Israeli security forces, along with six other Palestinian activists and defenders of human rights. Currently, Khitam Al-Saafin is being held in prison under administrative detention, that is, without either a charge or a trial. In October 2020, Khitam Al-Saafin spoke at a webinar organised by the World March of Women:

**As a global movement of women and as
Palestinians, we definitely converge in our anti-
imperialist objectives, because we consider**

imperialism, capitalism, colonialism, and occupation the main forces persecuting the peoples and creating social and economic crises on Earth – from the creation of poverty, hunger, and disease to issues related to the environment, wellbeing, social life, oppression, violence, and militarisation.¹

Although Al-Saafin spoke these words in reference to the World March of Women, they reflect many of the characteristic features of the global feminist movement of recent years. As such, they are particularly apt to describe some of the core commitments of the transnational feminist strike movement.

The feminist reinvention of the strike

The contemporary feminist strike movement began in autumn 2016 with the large-scale strikes organised in Poland and Argentina – for reproductive rights and against gender-based violence, respectively. It rapidly expanded to dozens of countries: between 2017 and 2021, five transnationally coordinated feminist strikes and days of action took place every 8 March. Women's strikes are not however a recent invention. The precursor of the current transnational wave of feminist strikes took place in 1975: the Icelandic women's strike for equal wages, which 90 percent of Icelandic women participated in, resulting in a historic legislative victory.² The spirit of the reinvention of the feminist strike over the past five years could be summarised through one of its most widespread slogans: 'If we stop, the world stops.'

The power of this slogan lies in its ability to convey at once a critique of capitalist social relations that exploit and undervalue the work of social reproduction, and a sense of collective, rather than individual, empowerment, based on the centrality of social reproductive labour (both waged and unwaged) to capitalist societies, and on the collective possibility of refusing that labour. This practical and theoretical reconceptualisation of the strike operated in two main ways: to reject the representation of women and gender or sexual dissidents as passive victims to be rescued by the state, through its carceral system or by well-intentioned men, and to anchor the feminist mobilisation in class struggle, its history and tradition.



Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, Warsaw, 2008. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

In order to achieve this, the feminist strike had to expand the scope of what is habitually considered as work or labour, considering the specificities of the exploitation of women's work in capitalist societies. Women's work in the formal labour market is only one part of the work performed by women: by organising feminist strikes, the movement drew attention to the crucially important work of social reproduction, which women often do without compensation or social recognition within the household, or in various precarious forms in the informal economy.³ The feminist strike made this unpaid and unstable work visible, stressing its contribution to the creation of social wealth as well as to the maintenance and reproduction of human life, understood not just in biological terms but as *socialised* life, endowed with meanings, affects, aspirations and desires.

Launching feminist strikes also posed major organisational challenges. If a vast number of women and gender or sexual dissidents hold precarious jobs, do not have access to labour rights, are unemployed, work in the informal economy or are undocumented workers, how could they be involved in a classical workplace strike? To tackle this question, the transnational feminist movement had to expand the meaning and scope of the strike in such a way as to include a pause in unpaid social reproductive work, part-time strikes, calls to employers to close businesses earlier than usual, boycotts, the organisation of mutualistic childcare, and other forms of protest that are sensitive to the gendered nature of social relations. For example, the Chilean Coordinadora Feminista 8M published a pamphlet detailing one hundred

ways to participate in the feminist strike, from symbolic participation to taking to the streets and becoming involved with acts of civil disobedience. 'Strike' therefore became the umbrella term under which all these forms of action are included, and the term that best emphasises the importance of social reproductive labour, whatever form this work takes.

This feminist reinvention of the strike significantly blurred the lines between what is commonly considered as labour or class struggle and what is understood as 'identity-based' or 'anti-oppression' politics. The term 'identity politics' was coined in 1977 by the Black feminist Combahee River Collective, to signal the centrality of anti-racist feminist politics to any anti-capitalist project of liberation.⁴ In subsequent decades, however, identity politics was appropriated by liberal feminism, which tended to pit it against class politics, erasing its original revolutionary orientation.⁵ At the same time, economic reductionist theories of class have also contributed to the divorce between anti-oppression and class politics, by reducing class to an abstract and quantifiable sociological category mostly tied to income and redistribution in a narrowly understood sense – that is without taking racial, gender and sexual inequalities, and the key issues of emancipation and liberation, into account. Yet if we consider class to be a political agent born from struggle and not simply a static economic entity,⁶ we should also recognise gender, race and sexuality as structural mediations of the way people experience class belonging, their relation to the world and their conditions of existence, and so as a necessary part of their processes of politicisation.



Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, Warsaw, 2008. The text reads: "Was, Is, Will Be".
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

The concrete experience of the feminist strikes, as well as the theories of social reproduction that inspired many of their organisers, contributed to making the question of whether class struggle should have priority over 'identity-based' or 'anti-oppression' struggles not only obsolete but also entirely misleading. By organising feminist strikes, the transnational feminist movement demonstrated the possibility of rearticulating a project of non-reductionist class struggle capable of having a mass appeal and of encompassing the complexity of the various ways in which class is concretely experienced through the mediation of gender, race and sexuality.

Finally, the adoption of the strike as both a main form of struggle and as the feminist movement's political identity marked the movement's distance from liberal feminism and its separation of identity and class in the service of a small sector of

elite, upper-middle-class women and LGBTQ+ people. Against the liberal feminist perspective of 'equal opportunity of domination' (as we dubbed it in *Feminism for the 99%*)⁷, the feminist strike movement emphasised the inseparability of gender and sexual liberation from the overcoming of inherently racist and sexist capitalist social relations. As the Spanish feminist movement summed up succinctly, women and gender or sexual dissidents went on strike not to break the glass ceiling but to '*cambiarlo todo*' – to change everything.

Shared features

This leads me back to the words of Khitam Al-Saafin, foregrounding the interlocked forces of capitalism and colonialism as the common obstacles to liberation, across places, peoples and identities. Despite local differences and specificities, in most cases, the feminist strike movement took a squarely and explicitly anti-capitalist stance. Ni una menos (Not one [woman] less), for example, which originated in Argentina and spread across Latin America, played a crucial role in reformulating gender-based violence as an anti-capitalist struggle. Rather than framing the notion of gender-based violence within the narrower terms of interpersonal violence or domestic abuse, Ni una menos draws attention to the continuum that unites forms of violence against women with the institutional violence of the state, the existence of borders, and capitalist relations of exploitation and oppression. In its call for the 2017 strike, Ni una menos denounced altogether the economic violence of exploitation; the violence of the nation state and policies of migration; the carceral system; the violence of the state against sex workers and trans women; femicides and sexual violence, both at an interpersonal and an institutional level; and symbolic and cultural violence. One of the hashtags adopted in the region was #noestamostodas: 'We are not all here':

The political prisoners, the persecuted, those murdered in our Latin American territory for defending the land and its resources, are missing. The women incarcerated for minor crimes that criminalise forms of survival, while the crimes of corporations and drug trafficking go unpunished because they benefit capital, are missing. Those who died from or were imprisoned for having unsafe abortions are missing. Those disappeared by trafficking networks and the victims of sexual exploitation are missing.⁸

From the very beginning, and thanks to the crucial influence and role of Ni una menos, most regional feminist movements articulated both local and transnational perspectives, not only in terms of organising but also as an active contestation of bordering, racism, imperialism and colonialism. Moreover, the broad movement

reiterated the point that racism, colonialism and imperialism *are* key feminist issues. In this spirit, for example, the Chilean feminist movement centred the issue of the colonial oppression of Mapuche women, while in Europe several movements adopted a position for open borders, attacking the EU's immigration policies and its murderous record in the Mediterranean Sea.



Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, Warsaw, 2008. The text reads: "Women Destroy Walls".
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.

The feminist movement's response to the pandemic

The year 2020 marked the beginning of a new global challenge for the feminist strike movement: the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2020, a transnational network of feminist movements and organisations, Cross Border Feminists, called for a day of action on May Day, borrowing an impactful slogan from the Chilean rebellion against neoliberal president Sebastián Piñera: 'We will not go back to normality, because normality was the problem.'

The group's manifesto continued:

The global feminist and trans-feminist movement, confronted with this new global health, economic, food, and ecological crisis, will not surrender to isolation and will not silence its struggles in the face of the restrictive measures undertaken in our territories to deal with the coronavirus. All over the world, women and LGBTQI+ people are refusing to submit to the multiple forms of violence that are exacerbated by the global pandemic and are beginning to organise by intertwining our rebellious practices, empowered by the strength of the recent years of global feminist strikes.⁹

The document emphasised that the current pandemic should not be seen as an exceptional situation from which we will recover to go back to a presumed normality. Rather, the pandemic should be seen as what I would call a 'magnifying lens' on the exploitative, oppressive and unsustainable nature of capitalist social relations, an accelerator of the multiple ongoing crises of capitalist societies.

The feminist strike movement arguably emerged in response to both the rise of an authoritarian and neoliberal right and an ongoing crisis of social reproduction prompted by the triumph of neoliberalism worldwide with its weapon of choice: debt.¹⁰ The Covid-19 pandemic clearly brought to light the fundamental contradiction between social reproduction, or the activity of life-making, and the mad pursuit of profit by capitalist production.¹¹ The new virus is not only a consequence of the capitalist organisation of agricultural production and environmental (mis)management.¹² The political and social management of the pandemic is also determined by dynamics that have to do with capitalism's constraints on social reproduction. The defunding of healthcare systems, one of the first causes of the skyrocketing death toll in certain countries across the globe, is part of a set of austerity policies that have attacked social reproduction on various fronts – from social services and housing for victims of domestic abuse, to childcare, community services, care for the elderly, education, social housing, abortion services, and more.

Already at the outset of the pandemic, evolutionary epidemiologist Rob Wallace, among others, denounced that most mathematical models predicting the pandemic's evolution in order to advise on mitigation measures were predicated upon an implicit acceptance of neoliberalism as our unquestionable horizon.¹³ This approach to the handling of the pandemic put a heavy burden on individual behaviours without either addressing the systemic reasons for the current catastrophe or developing a comprehensive politics of public support for those in need. The outcome has been especially disastrous for women and LGBTQ+ people. School closures occurred in many countries without making provisions for caregivers, who experienced a significant increase in childcare; due to the unequal division of social reproductive labour, this affected women in particular. Because of their social reproductive responsibilities in the absolute absence of support, along with business closures during lockdowns, women have withdrawn from the formal labour market on a large scale. In the United States, for example, 11.3 million jobs held by women vanished in the months immediately after the spring 2020 shutdowns, as women represent most of the workforce in the retail, restaurant, travel and hospitality sectors. It was estimated that, even after reopenings, it will take twenty-eight months to regain these pandemic losses. Finally, 'shelter-in-place' orders have made no or inadequate provisions for victims of domestic abuse (women, children and LGBTQ+ people) for whom home is not a safe place at all, to the point that in April 2020 the United Nations already warned about an escalation in domestic violence.¹⁴

One of the lessons here is that, insofar as the pandemic is bringing to light, in such a clear and tragic way, the class, gender and racial relations that structure our societies, it should also compel us to criticise and denounce what passed as normality beforehand. Considering women's prominent role in the struggle to survive amid the pandemic – and in the struggle against its neoliberal governance –

it is not by chance that some of the sharpest proposals for how not to return to 'normality' have come from feminist movements and activists.

In their *Seven Theses*, published in April 2020, the Marxist Feminist Collective called for the decommodification of 'health, education and other life-making activities'; the investment of stimulus packages, not in the bailout of private companies but in life-making work; the social recognition of social reproduction workers through better wages and working conditions; the immediate release of those imprisoned in immigrant detention centres, jails and prisons; and the adoption of modes and mechanisms of care being developed experimentally in mutual aid organising.¹⁵ In Italy, Non una di meno mobilised for an 'income for self-determination' in response to lockdowns and job losses and as a way to face the escalation in domestic violence.¹⁶ In Chile, the feminist movement combined recent protests with the organisation of mutual aid to support women and queer people in need who have been abandoned by the government in its pandemic measures. Indeed, one of the most comprehensive sets of demands and proposals for addressing the pandemic crisis emerged from the Chilean Coordinadora Feminista 8M, whose 'Emergency Plan' surpassed the divide between mutual-aid-based politics and state intervention.¹⁷ One set of proposals aimed to strengthen mutual aid networks and community-based organisations in order to cater to people's needs during the lockdown, by organising collective childcare or awareness-raising around health risks. Another set of proposals targeted the specific problem of the escalation in gender-based violence against women and queer people during the lockdown: from setting up an emergency phone number, to safe housing, and networks and centres for the support and protection of victims of gender-based violence. The plan, moreover, called for a 'General Strike for Life', demanding economic measures in support of workers in both the formal and informal economies, childcare provisions, paid medical leave, and a freeze on personal debt repayments and lay-offs. The plan also remembered the plight of imprisoned people and their disproportionate exposure to Covid-19 infections; it called for imprisonment to be converted into house arrest for all prisoners with health risks and for those waiting for trial.

The pandemic crisis has been a bitter vindication of the feminist strike movement's insistence on foregrounding social reproductive labour. With the outbreak of the virus, millions of women were suddenly celebrated, with a great deal of empty rhetoric, 'as essential workers'. Meanwhile, they continued to be exploited in the workplace, to be exposed to greater risks of contagion, and to be left to their own devices in homes where they frequently had to carry the heavy burden of child or elderly care, or to be exposed to domestic abuse with no way out. The pandemic makes clear that 'barbarism' is not a future possibility, it is our current form of social life. Our normality was barbaric, and the only way *not* to return to an even-worse version of it, is, as feminists in Spain have repeated for the past three years, to change everything.

1.

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2.

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On social reproduction theory, see Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentering Gender*, London, Pluto Press, 2017.

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'The Combahee River Collective Statement', 1978, [blackpast.org](https://www.blackpast.org).

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See E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society – Class Struggle Without Class?', *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1978, pp. 133–65; Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E.P. Thompson and his Critics', *Studies in Political Economy*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1982, pp. 45–75; Daniel Bensaid, *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, London, Verso, 2002.

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Ni una menos, 'Llamamiento al Paro Internacional de Mujeres – 8 de marzo 2017', 23 January 2017, niunamenos.org (my translation). For a discussion of prison abolitionism within the Latin American feminist movement, see Susana Draper, 'No estamos todas, faltan las presas! Contemporary Feminist Practices Building Paths toward Prison Abolition', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2020, docs.lib.purdue.edu.

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Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care', *New Left Review*, 100, 2016, pp. 99–117, [newleftreview.org](https://www.newleftreview.org).

12.

See Mike Davis, *The Monster Enters: COVID-19, Avian Flu and the Plagues of*

13.

Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves and Rodrick Wallace, 'Covid-19 and Circuits of Capital', *Monthly Review*, 1 May 2020, monthlyreview.org. See also Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologist: On the Origins of Covid-19*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2020.

14.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Women website, 'Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic', 6 April 2020, unwomen.org.

15.

The Marxist Feminist Collective, 'Seven Theses on Social Reproduction and the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Spectre Journal*, 3 April 2020, spectrejournal.com.

16.

See nonunadimeno.wordpress.com.

17.

See media.elmostrador.cl.

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