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Women

How Women Are Leading the Class Struggle

- Features - Feminism -

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On Wednesday 12 May, 25,000 teachers in Oregon walked off their jobs, shutting down at least 600 schools across the state as part of a campaign for smaller class sizes, more nurses and guidance counselors, and better funding for public education (paid for by taxing the rich). [1] [2]

Meanwhile, teachers in Las Vegas are voting this week on whether to join the nationwide strike wave, which has largely been led by educators. [3] Hundreds of thousands of public school teachers and education workers struck last year, the overwhelming majority without the protection of traditional collective bargaining rights. So did thousands of nurses and hotel workers. Outside of the workplace, migrant women traveling with a caravan launched a hunger strike in Tijuana to protest delays in the asylum process; Irish women overturned that country's abortion ban; and Spanish women led the resistance to the rise of the far right. [4] [5] [6]

This upsurge of activity is part of a movement of working women revitalizing class struggle across the world. According to Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, co-authors of *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, these struggles are best understood through the theoretical lens of social reproduction, which describes the kind of labor necessary to sustain capitalism over time: preparing workers to go back to their jobs day after day, looking after sick or retired workers, and making new workers (i.e. babies). Such labor, devalued and obscured, is mostly done by women. Those who perform it often do not earn a wage for doing so, and when social reproductive labor is introduced to the market or privatized—as with education or health care in the United States—it is frequently racialized, which contributes further to wage suppression.

But it is the seemingly-inexorable structural pressure to reduce costs—whether by forcing women to work for free, attacking labor rights, or importing immigrant labor—that creates the very conditions for working-class women to fight back. “By coupling the withdrawal of labor with marches, demonstrations, small business closures, blockades, and boycotts, the movement is replenishing the repertoire of strike actions, once large but dramatically shrunk by a decades-long neoliberal offensive,” Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser write. “At the same time, this new wave is democratizing strikes and expanding their scope—above all, by broadening the very idea of what counts as labor.”

Recently, I sat down with Arruzza, an Italian feminist and International Women's Strike organizer who teaches philosophy at The New School, to talk about labor, neoliberalism, and why our understanding of class struggle must include struggles over social reproduction. The interview has been lightly condensed and edited for clarity.

Splinter: In your appearance on the *Season of the Bitch* podcast, you spoke about the “two souls” of feminism: one liberal, one anti-capitalist. [7] Before we get into the failure or crisis of liberal feminism to which the Manifesto is responding, I wonder if you could give an account of how these two souls have related to each other and interacted up until this point of crisis.

Arruzza: As far as the United States are concerned, Angela Davis's book *Women, Race, and Class* documents the historical tension between what we may call liberal feminism—so, for example, the suffragist movement that was basically dominated and led by middle class women—and the needs, interests, and demands of both white working class women and black women. You can see also similar dynamics in other countries too. In Germany in the 19th century, there was a tension between the liberal feminist movement that was basically advancing demands for access to education and equal access to professions, and then the kind of social democratic intervention developed by Clara Zetkin, specifically around working class women, with demands that had to do with their working conditions

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or maternity leave or sexual abuse in the workplace, which were not taken into consideration by the more mainstream liberal feminist movement.

When I spoke about two souls, what I had in mind is the fact that there is, historically speaking, a soul of feminism that fights for gender parity or gender equality within existing social relations, that doesn't really question, for example, the class structure of society or the other kinds of hierarchies that exist in society, but demands basic parity, equality between men and women within the various classes or the various strata. And then that is another tendency within feminism for which gender equality within existing social relations has never been enough. I'm referring not just to socialist feminism but feminism within the anarchist movement, and also radical feminism"at least initially, the kind of radical feminism that developed in the United States"and also materialist feminism in France.

These strands used the gender perspective"the perspective of women's oppression"as a form of critique of society as a whole, of hierarchies as a whole. It's not just coming from Marxist feminism. In radical feminism, for example, the idea is that gender inequality and the oppression of women is the root of all other forms of social hierarchies and power relations. These various tendencies within feminism didn't separate the issue of fighting for women's emancipation and liberation from the struggle for transforming society as a whole.

Liberal feminism can be understood in different ways. There was the suffragist movement, which sometimes developed demands for social rights, but was basically representative of middle class women. And then we also have the liberal managerial feminism, focusing much more on elite women. The main demand is "breaking the glass ceiling," promoting women's entrepreneurship, having women managers, and so on and so on.

Splinter: Why is that in crisis now? Was it doomed to failure or is there something else going on?

Arruzza: In the '60s and '70s, the second wave [of feminism] was actually quite radical. It took place within the context of the New Left, it was influenced by the Black Power movement and its slogans and an analysis, by the anti-colonial struggles and so on. Again, it was not all socialist feminism, but the various tendencies within the feminist movement were quite radical in challenging social relations and capitalism.

With the end of this period and the defeat of a number of struggles, mainstream feminism got increasingly attached to neoliberalism. It increasingly identified with the neoliberal language and discourse, the emphasis on individual choice"the whole development of a "choice" narrative"basically taking women as social monads, as individuals who can free themselves by having the right to choose about their bodies, about what kind of professions they want to pursue, what kind of education, but decoupling this from a consideration of the social context in which those choices actually take place. It's not just the laws on abortion and so on that limit women's choices, but also social relations"class, race, and so on.

In this period, [amid] three or four decades of neoliberalism, clearly there were still radical tendencies within feminism (black feminism, intersectionality, radical queer theory), but what became mainstream"in the sense that it was co-opted by state institutions and by mainstream parties and organizations"was basically a feminism shaped by a sort of trickle-down logic. In other words, individual empowerment and self empowerment, focusing especially on the "glass ceiling" issue, on elite or upper middle class women, with the idea that this would then benefit everybody else in the same way in which the trickle-down economy was supposed to work: capitalist companies flourish and this will automatically increase benefits for everybody else.

Part of the crisis of liberal feminism has to do with the hegemonic crisis of neoliberalism in general. People have had enough time to actually experience it directly and test it in their own lives, and their conditions in life have not

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improved. They have gotten much worse! The same applies to feminism in the sense that, clearly, compared to the â€˜60s, we do have women CEOs, women with power, women leading nations and so on, but this has not translated to an improvement of women's conditions in general. The diversification of the ruling class doesn't do anything for oppressed people. At least in the United States, the fact that Hillary Clinton lost the election was symptomatic of a crisis of the political agenda of neoliberal feminism.

Splinter: A key concept in *Feminism for the 99%* is that of "social reproduction." Could you give a brief genealogy of this idea? How did it come to you?

Arruzza: The notion of "reproduction" is in Marx. It has three meanings: one is the reproduction of labor power; the second is the reproduction of capital; and the third is societal reproductionâ€"what is required for a society to reproduce itself.

The concept of social reproduction was developed by [Louis] Althusser, in the form of the reproduction of conditions of production. Althusser insists on the fact that if we analyze capitalism we cannot focus just on economic production, but we need to also see the way in which the conditions for exploitation are reproduced socially. So this means looking at ideological state apparatuses.

[In the â€˜60s and â€˜70s,] the notion of social reproduction was appropriated by feminist theorists, in particular by Italian feminists coming from *operaismo*, and then UK and Canadian and US Marxist feminists. In this context, social reproduction came to identify particularly the reproduction of labor powerâ€"it's a narrower understanding of social reproduction than Althusser's. By this what is meant is the everyday physical and emotional reproductionâ€"not just care labor in the sense of cooking and cleaning and taking care of the sick and so on, but also emotional, affective labor. And then it is intergenerational reproductionâ€"the socialization of children, education.

The notion was developed by various Marxist feminists in different ways, with the intent to emphasize the role of women's labor for the reproduction of capital. There is a whole sphere of activities, of work, that necessarily has to take place for labor power to be able to be sold in the formal labor market. When Marx discusses the reproduction of labor power in *Capital*, he takes into account only the commodities that are necessary to produce labor powerâ€"what you have to buy in order to reproduce yourself, from rent to food to clothing. What these feminists emphasized is the fact that these commodities are not the whole story, because there is also some work that goes into making these commodities accessible to people. So, to use Christine Delphy's example, you don't eat a raw pig; somebody has to cook it. Somebody has to iron the shirts. [8]

Initially, in the 60s and 70s, the focus was mostly on domestic labor. The idea was that most of this labor of social reproduction takes place within the home. And then increasingly the gates got blown up, because in fact activities of social reproduction take place in the home, in the formal labor market, and in public institutions. Public childcare, or the education system, or public hospitalsâ€"these are sites of social reproduction. And especially with neoliberalism we are also seeing an increase in the commodification of social reproduction, so for example private childcare, private hospitals, private schools, private care companies managing caregivers, chain restaurants, chain laundries, Seamless. All of this has really proliferated in the last decades. It is a process which is not happening the same way or at the same speed everywhere but it's a process of increasing commodification of social reproduction that is transforming a large chunk of social reproduction to a profitable market.

Splinter: In the book, you argue that this labor is devalued and people do this work for free because there is a structural incentive to keep costs down. But in commodifying it, the work isn't being done for free anymore. Is there a tension there?

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Arruzza: No, I don't think so. It becomes a market if it can be profitable. There must be a demand. There must be people that can afford to pay for these services. So, for example, if you take Italy—southern Italy has one of the lowest level of women's employment in Europe. This means that women actually do a lot of work, but it's unpaid, unwaged, in the home and so on. If you look at the process of commodification of social reproduction in the south of Italy, it's much smaller than even in the north of Italy. The level of income is much lower. So basically it is a different kind of configuration of the organization of social reproduction. Women stay at home or work at home to reproduce people in their family whose level of income would not be sufficient to pay for privatized, commodified services. If you take New York, it's a completely different structure in the sense that here you have a big layer of people who can actually pay, because of the level of income and salaries and so on, for services. We don't have Seamless in Sicily, but there is Seamless here. [9] Or chain laundries. It would not be profitable in the same way.

This also depends on struggles. It's not just an economic matter; it's also a political matter. Where the workers' movement has been sufficiently strong to impose a greater level of redistribution through public institutions, like public health care and so on, this leaves less space for the commodification of health care. So in Italy again, because of the workers' movement, we have a free public health care system and a very good public education system. This is not because Italian capitalists are nice. Here, on the contrary, all these sectors of social reproduction are much more commodified.

Splinter: Theorists of social reproduction argue for broadening the very idea of what counts as labor, a corollary to which is that class struggle includes struggles over social reproduction. In the *Manifesto*, however, you allude to resistance from an "old school understanding" of what counts as labor or what qualifies as class struggle. Could you elaborate on what those old school understandings are and why there would be resistance to this? Because at least as it is articulated in this text it seems pretty self-evident, but if it was self-evident then you wouldn't have had to write it.

Arruzza: There have always been economist tendencies within Marxism, or within socialism, to identify class struggle with the labor movement—the union-led movement. This already is a problem. And then to focus on class struggle only at the point of production. You can see this still in conversations today, even within the DSA [Democratic Socialists of America]. There has been also the tendency to create a hierarchy of struggle: factory workers struggling at the point of production first, and then secondary struggles in obeisance [to the factory workers]. The Italian Communist Party even created some kind of diagram with this hierarchization of the various forms of struggle and how they relate to each other.

Now, there is something to be said for this. It's not just because of narrow-mindedness. There is an issue that is real, which is the effectiveness of the struggle. Clearly, strikes at the point of production are among the most powerful tools we have. The problem though is to understand that, especially with the restructuring of the labor process around the world and the way in which production takes place, very often you need to create the conditions for having massive workplace strikes or struggles. These conditions very often depend on political conditions outside of the workplace. It is not by chance that we are having a strike wave now, after eight years of social struggles outside of the workplace: Occupy, Black Lives Matter, the Dakota pipeline. The Sanders campaign has also been part of the process. This has created the climate, the political climate, and this makes strikes more credible to people. In a strike, there are stakes involved. At the very least you lose some money and in situations like the United States you risk your job. So you need to have the confidence that the struggle works. In a strong sense, movements like Black Lives Matter created the conditions of possibility for a strike wave in the workplace. And so our polemic is toward those who think that these social movements are secondary because they're not blocking production and we should all focus on unionization and workplace struggles.

The other issue has to do with unions and union bureaucracies and how you address this problem. The labor movement has become largely bureaucratized everywhere, with direct involvement in capitalist management, like managing or owning pension funds implicates you within capitalist social relations. So, how do you address the issue

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of union bureaucracies that have a tendency to manage labor rather than to trigger conflict, or to manage conflict, to channel conflict rather than to develop conflict. There is work to be done.

The feminist movements in Argentina and in Spain are playing a key role in radicalizing unions again. This was possible because it was a movement involving rank-and-file union activists, not just in the workplace but outside the workplace, pressuring unions to radicalize their demands, to call for strikes, to support the feminist movement and so on. Historically, if you look at the period between '67-'77 in Italy, the moment of big radicalization of the unions was prepared by the students' movement, was taking place in a situation of social mobilization, which impacted on social reproduction as well, that then radicalized workers in the workplace.

Splinter: Even unionized workers don't exist solely in the workplace.

Arruzza: The point of this insistence on social reproduction is precisely that workers are people. They're not just workers in the workplace, they're people who have a life, with families, with relations, who have to pay rent, who may have desires. Class struggle cannot be conceived just as organizing in the workplace—there are various entry points for organization, for mobilization, and the problem is to recognize these as class struggle and not as something that is separate.

Splinter: In addition to the bureaucratization of the labor movement, especially in the U.S., it may be the case that some number, even some significant number, of union bureaucrats are dismissive of this kind of idea because as individuals they are sexist or misogynist or what have you. But taking the most generous interpretation—that actually it's less about individual bigotry and more about making strategic choices and effectiveness—would you argue that even that is incorrect, because just as there is immense power in organizing at the point of production and striking at the point of production, there is power in organizing at the point of social reproduction?

Arruzza: Yes!

Splinter: What does that look like? Is it a matter of people who a unionist might not necessarily recognize as workers withdrawing their labour, but that actually is what they're doing?

Arruzza: I don't know if they are withdrawing their labor; it depends on what they are doing, and it's not necessarily that. There was more of an opening from certain unions at least during the Occupy movement, but situations in which you have social movements like Occupy that are not really taking place within the workplace directly, but rather in the city, or the *indignados* in Spain, Taksim Square in Turkey, and so on—these are movements that change the political conversation. When I came to the States in 2010, the Tea Party dominated political discourse, and then Occupy happened. This changed the political conversation. Now, this cannot be seen as separated from creating the possibility for workplace struggles. It actually did contribute, for example, in creating all sorts of political relations among activists—there were the labor working groups in Occupy—and this facilitated exchanges and alliances among rank-and-file activists who are participating from different unions and so on.

Look at the history of the worker's movement internationally: very often when you have a very powerful labor movement this is also because there is a mobilization that goes beyond. Even recently in the States, the Chicago teachers strike experimented this way. It was a workplace strike, but at the same time they also mobilized the city, organizing all forms of social reproduction for the kids who couldn't go to school. This happened also in West Virginia. When you look at successful strikes—or strikes that in any case have managed to gain something—very often you can see that there is something going on outside of the workplace.

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It's much harder to win in isolation, if you are just within the boundaries of the workplace. Even if it's just a matter of contractual demands, even in that case it's hard to win if you don't have a larger mobilization.

Splinter: Is it any coincidence that the recent strike wave has been led by teachers?

Arruzza: No. It has to do with what we call the crisis of social reproduction that is characterizing this neoliberal moment. This process had already started with the increasing privatization of education and health care, but especially after 2008, with massive cuts on public education etc. This has created a situation in which the public education sector on the one hand increasingly lost quality—the quality of education deteriorated, and this is an element in the mobilization of the teachers. They don't mobilize just around their wages. Like the nurses here in New York, they emphasize also the fact that in these conditions they cannot really provide quality education or proper health care. And on the other hand, there was an attack on labor rights and on wages.

So, these two elements combined: the deterioration of the quality of the work, in the service provided, and the deterioration of working conditions and wages. This explains why we have a strike wave starting especially from teachers. What is interesting is that this is a phenomenon that is not characteristic of just the States but around the world, some of the most recent workplace struggles took place within the sector of social reproduction. And the protagonists are women. Again I think it has to do with the fact that the pressure to lower the cost of social reproduction has been so strong that it has created an unsustainable situation.

Splinter: What are some parallel examples?

Arruzza: The Dalit cleaners in India, the women workers in Glasgow last fall, teachers' strikes in other countries. [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#) [\[14\]](#) It may also have to do with the fact that these are also among the few workplaces with large masses of workers—a hospital, for example, has a fair amount of employees. But I think it has to do with the impact of the crisis on social reproduction and the fact that people cannot sustain this situation anymore.

Splinter: Do you see that spreading or retracting?

Arruzza: At the moment, still spreading. The problem we have today is that one of the reactions to this crisis—not just the crisis of social reproduction but the economic crisis—is the rise of the right. On the one hand, we have a powerful, more transnational feminist movement, we have an increase in struggles and strikes. But also we have the very dangerous rise of the far right, from Latin America to United States to India to Europe. Everywhere.

Struggles are on the rise, and I think we will probably see an expansion of strikes, and I think the feminist movement is still in an expansive dynamic, but the context is hard. The rise of the right is actually the dominant phenomenon at the moment.

Splinter: In the *Manifesto*, you relate “sexual reaction” and “sexual liberalism,” and also “reactionary populism” and “progressive neoliberalism,” as not actually being counterposed.

Arruzza: They are counterposed in a sense, but not in another.

Splinter: Haha, okay, so how are they counterposed and how are they not counterposed?

Arruzza: They are both neoliberal projects. Even the far right is presenting itself as a response to neoliberalism. Think

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about Trump's protectionism and so on. But what they are actually doing is exactly the same everywhere. They come to power presenting themselves as the alternative to neoliberalism but they are actually carrying out neoliberal policies. What is different is the way in which they do it—their political management is different. So in this sense, yes, there is an actual divide, but from the viewpoint of the neoliberal, the politics is the same.

Progressive neoliberalism has coupled aggressive neoliberal, austerity policies with progressive politics, in terms of civil rights, sexual freedoms, formal gender equality and so on. At the same time in which they recognize and warrant rights at the legal level, or in terms of symbolic recognition, they erode the social conditions for actual equality—gender equality or racial equality—to take place.

The far right basically is taking advantage of this association between neoliberalism and progressive politics, in terms of legal rights, gender or sexual or identity, in order to articulate a political project that presents itself as entirely in opposition: going back to traditional values, blaming trans women or trans people in general for the collapse of the family, blaming immigration for the degradation of our conditions of life or for unemployment and so on and so on, and attributing responsibility for this to progressive forces. But they both privatize, they both attack labor rights, they both wage wars—in different ways, but they both carry on imperialist or neocolonial projects—one by appealing to people's fears and desire for tradition, presenting themselves as defenders of the family or traditional values against all these bad people, and the others presenting themselves as the progress, those who "civilize" society. Like Biden: the one who will save this nation from the fascists.

Splinter: After two years—it feels like 200 years—of a Trump presidency, I think it might be hard for people to wrap their heads around the idea that at bottom things are not much different than they would have been otherwise.

Arruzza: One of the main differences—and this is a difference—is that Trump has legitimized the far right and all possible racists and misogynists around the country. We've had an increase in violence against oppressed people. So, this is a difference, clearly. The kind of language one uses has consequences. His ties to white supremacists clearly has consequences.

Splinter: But the conditions for that were created by the neoliberal project.

Arruzza: Obama in the end deepened the security state, providing Trump with the tools to do what he's doing. Deportations were happening; yes, there has been an increase, but the structural politics are the same.

Splinter: In the *Manifesto*, you write, "Everything depends on our ability to develop a guiding perspective that neither simply celebrates nor brutally obliterates the differences among us." I think that is a key encapsulation of the task before the left, but how do we do that? To thread that needle seems nigh impossible from where we sit right now.

Arruzza: We should look to the struggles that are already happening, that are already doing this. For me, in the United States, it would be really important to really look at what is happening in terms of the feminist wave around the world, which is carrying on precisely this kind of politics—it's a concrete universalism at the mass level. In Spain, six million people went on strike on March 8. We don't necessarily need to reinvent the wheel. We can take inspiration from processes of struggle that are already taking place. They're not the solution. They do not give us the complete answer to what we should do, but clearly we can take inspiration. Instead of thinking of new models in our head, let's start from actual processes that are happening and see how certain kinds of movements are managing to precisely articulate this kind of class politics that at the same time is also feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and so on.

[Splinter](#)

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[1] <https://splinternews.com/oregon-teachers-stage-mass-walkout-as-teacher-revolt-co-1834632483>.

[2] <https://www.oregonlive.com/education/2019/05/may-8-teacher-walkout-which-districts-are-closing-what-to-expect-and-why-educators-are-protestin-g.html>.

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[8] <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-free-labor-force-of-wives-a-conversation-with-french-feminist-writer-christine-delphy/>.

[9] Seamless is an on line food delivery service.

[10] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/world/asia/india-dalit-protest.html>.

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[14] <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/iran-teachers-protest-strike-siting-working-conditions.html>.