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# The Feminist Horizon

- Features - Feminism -

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As the organizers of the [International Women's Strike](#) (IWS) have declared, March 8, 2018 will be “a day of feminism for the 99 percent.” One year ago to the day, [International Women's Day](#), women and their allies around the globe participated in the first [International Women's Strike](#), which was billed as “A Day Without a Woman.” Building on the international momentum from the [Women's March](#) earlier in 2017, strikers took to the streets and demonstrated from [Tokyo](#) to [Rome](#), [Istanbul](#) to [Mexico City](#), [Manila](#) to [Los Angeles](#). In the United States, school districts in multiple states [were shut down](#), demonstrators filled [city centers](#) and [university grounds](#)—even [some elected officials](#) in Washington, D.C., showed solidarity.

As any movement will, the [IWS received](#) its fair [share of criticism](#), and the longer-term success of the 2017 strike remains up for debate. But what does “success” actually entail in this case? After “A Day Without a Woman” last March, things seemingly went back to “[normal](#)”—Trump was still president, racism and patriarchy continued to run rampant, the exploitative machinations of capital hummed along merrily, drowning out the cries of a [world in pain](#). In the [hyper-mediated swarm](#) of our [eternal political present](#), anything short of instant, spectacular gratification—or anything shy of immediate, tangible gains—*feels* like a failure. In this sense, the mere fact that IWS is back for a second year is already a significant achievement. But the women and allies driving [the new feminist movement](#) behind IWS have set the bar much higher. One could hardly look back at the dramatic and widespread efforts to [dismantle patriarchal power](#) over the past year and suggest that this movement hasn't become a formidable force. The real question is: what next?

Like last year, the IWS on March 8 is slated to be a “[political strike](#)”; that is, a strike whose concerns are not limited to the workplace. The IWS organizers take a wider view of all the forms of women's paid and unpaid labor within interlocking, global systems of discrimination, exploitation, and violence. In the [words of Tithi Bhattacharya](#), one of the national organizers for the IWS in the United States, “the reason people strike is because of the poor conditions of their life. It's not necessarily that they strike because of their job. . . . A political strike gives a wider, deeper context to the meaning of struggle and the gains to be had from struggle and solidarity.” And, indeed, it is in movements like the IWS that “the meaning of struggle” is being rewritten for a new age.

The notion of left internationalism in the twenty-first century has felt, more often than not, like an outdated fever dream. Limping toward the quarter-century mark, one would have plenty of reason to believe that ours is a leftist political scene riven with irreparable divisions, that ours is a political era where the potential for broad solidarity has splintered among conflicting camps of innumerable allegiances, concerns, and identities. It is in this sense that one cannot help but see the international feminist movement driving IWS as a kind of circling of the wagons. Reading the [IWS organizers' platform](#), one is struck by the [breadth of the issues](#) they are striking against: sexual violence, racism, economic insecurity, destruction of the climate, the erosion of the social safety net, mass incarceration, imperialism, police violence, and border controls, etc. But one is struck with even greater force by the way that the IWS corrals these seemingly disparate issues into a singular, infinitely demanding rejection of the *systemic* conditions of life itself, around the world, for the women of the 99 percent.

If not a new proletariat itself, the IWS and the movement it represents is still harnessing the forces of *proletarianization* in everyday life under global (racist) capitalism. In response to the many, irreducibly diverse kinds of pain and struggle this totalizing system imposes on women around the globe, women are forging expansive, flexible forms of solidarity without which a better world can't be imagined, much less realized. On March 8, this solidarity will manifest once again in an international political strike, but it will by no means end there. I sat down with Jodi Dean, activist, author, and member of the IWS National Planning Committee, to get her perspective on the strike and what it means for feminism and the future of leftist politics.

**So, the International Women's Strike is back. Last year's showing was really impressive but, clearly, it wasn't just a flash in the pan. What does this tell us about the political movement driving IWS?**

It tells us that women are fierce, mobilized, and radically unwilling to let corporate white liberal Democratic Party celebrity feminism steer the movement.

The IWS in the United States is in an interesting place. On the one hand, International Women's Day is a big deal all over the world. There are intense preparations going on in Argentina and the UK, for example, mass assemblies and rallies to prepare for the international women's strike. And this is part of a long tradition. Many countries observe IWD with rallies and marches and other events (some places seem to me to not get it quite right as they observe it by giving women flowers). IWD even had a role in the Russian Revolution. China Mieville brings this out beautifully in his fantastic book, [October](#). IWD helped ignite the February Revolution. After multiple meetings and rallies, speeches and celebrations, detailing the conditions of women, criticizing the war, and emphasizing the unbearable cost of living, women poured into the streets of Petrograd. Crowding into the most radical working-class districts of the city, they shouted for men to join them. Soon 90,000 were in the streets calling for bread, an end to the war, and an end to the monarchy. Strikes, marches, and demonstrations continued over the next week and led, ultimately, to the overthrow of the tsar. Anyway, my point is that the United States has been a sad outlier from the international recognition and celebration of International Women's Day. Considered from an international perspective, the energy in America around the women's strike last year and this year is us playing catch up.

On the other hand, there is something specific and exciting about the way that the International Women's Strike caught on last year and is building this year. The outpouring of opposition to Trump last year in the January 21 demonstrations and this year in the January 20 demonstrations shows women protesting at a scale that we haven't seen in the movement in a very long time. Women are mad. Fed up. Many are inspired by the [#MeToo](#), [#UsToo](#), and [#TimesUp](#) campaigns that have resulted, finally, in holding men at the top of the food chain accountable.

For many women, these marches are the first time they've participated in mass demonstrations, the first time they've protested. For some, this is not an easy step: they move from understanding themselves as good citizens and from understanding politics as voting to something new, to a sense of themselves as activists and to politics as requiring radical change. Their new vocabulary helps reinforce their new political identity—"Per-sisters and Nasty Women, terms used to denigrate Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton that newly politically energized women have embraced. So even if the shift here is from pantsuit to pussy hat, it needs to be commended—and recognized as absolutely necessary if there is to be anything close to progressive change in the United States.

Last year's demonstrations were primarily about outrage—"anti-Trump and despair over Clinton's loss. [This year's January 20 protests](#) were more ambiguous. Anti-Trump was still a feature, but so was [the sense of power](#) from #MeToo as well as a new and growing emphasis on using the electoral process at multiple levels to try to change the system. We saw in the January 20 protests, then, both a great deal of effort to push women into electoral campaigns and a sense that the deep problems in the U.S.—the racism and white supremacy, the militarism and imperialism, the violence against women and sexual minorities, the hostility toward immigrants, the carceral system and aggressive policing, the refusal to deal with climate change, and, of course, the ever intensifying economic inequality—won't be solved through elections. The work of Black Lives Matter, the Standing Rock Sioux, long-standing radical feminist organizing going on below the radar, and the efforts of many other fighters made this realization possible. In sum, because of their work we also saw in the January 20 protests large groups of organized women refusing to be sheep-dogged into electoral politics and already heading in a more radical direction.

These are the energies driving the International Women's Strike in America. Last year, committed socialist women with years of movement experience formed a national organizing committee as a way to bring a concrete political vision to the rapidly growing struggle. Like last year, a key goal of this year's strike is building and giving voice to a

Feminism for the 99 percent. This is a feminism that refuses to let the success of one rich white woman detract us from the real conditions of most women's lives—conditions of racial inequality, of gender violence, of economic exploitation and inequality, of workplace sexual harassment, of a police and criminal justice system designed to protect the rich and kill the poor, of inadequate health care, education, and housing. These are all women's issues. In effect, these are all elements of a single struggle against racist capitalist patriarchy and for a society of the many.

**On the crest of the #MeToo/#TimesUp moment, with the IWS, the Women's March, etc. looming large in the landscape of political resistance over the past year, would it be wrong or naïve to say that, as far as the future of the left is concerned, women are in the driver's seat?**

It would be correct! Now here's the tricky part: does this mean that left men are finally acknowledging the work that radical left women have been doing for years? Does this mean that women are doing the work we've always done? That we are taking care of everything, arranging everything, etc, just like we do in the domestic sphere and the men are coasting along and benefitting, perhaps finding ways to capitalize on our labor or getting more leisure time while we end up spending countless hours organizing? Are left men being driven around by women chauffeurs, or are they working with us as comrades in emancipatory egalitarian struggle?

Maybe another way to approach this question is to consider what's changed. Is it the case that men are learning to listen and to follow? Have men on the left stopped trying to dominate everything—and have the last thirty-odd years in the neoliberal wilderness actually led to some concrete changes in gender relations on the left such that men have learned to make some space? Is it a generational shift such that younger men are less likely to think that theirs are the only voices in the room?

Or have men essentially been forced to acquiesce to women's leadership and, if so, has this force come from left women or from the determinations of capitalism? A materialist analysis would draw out the concrete changes in the composition of the labor force, in college education, etc., and this would direct us to the way that larger numbers of women throughout the paid labor force (although of course not every sector is the same; some remain gendered in ways others do not) combined with the various hits men have taken have generated conditions where women's leadership is necessary for survival. (This dynamic is already a long-standing feature of the lives of many African-Americans.) From this angle, it appears that changes in women's educational and economic circumstances have put us in a position of more opportunity and capacity for leadership. Women are taking the lead in so many sectors of the movement. It feels to me like we are filling a vacuum.

**I really like the way you flipped the question. I think doing so leads us to reframe not only what's happening with politics from below, at the grassroots, but also what is happening at the highest echelons of power. It's easy to despair and see the Trumpian takeover of the political scene as a world-historical repudiation of the values IWS stands for (Trump himself would probably be the first to say so).**

**In response to this world-historical shift, the left has been scrambling to repair and adjust, to point fingers, to locate and get rid of the supposedly poisonous parts of our politics that many argue have led to our current defeat. But as I listen to you, and look at these massive mobilizations of feminist energy, a different, more encouraging picture emerges. That also seems to be the case if we think more broadly about the [kind of solidarity and action](#) we're seeing with teens across the country in the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shooting—to say nothing of the fact that the millennial generation has shown itself to be way more [receptive to socialism](#) than any other. These shifts make me wonder whether the Trumpian rebellion really is a sign of the world-historical rejection of the things the left fights for. Maybe it instead represents the violent thrashing of interlocking systems of patriarchal, racist, exclusionary, exploitative power that are threatened by the rumbling from below. Stripping away as much naïveté and groundless optimism as possible, never once losing sight of the dire state of things, would you say that the left currently has more potential than many, including lefties, realize?**

Yes, yes, yes! We have to look at the “Trumpian rebellion” as a reaction. I want to say it indeed marks a reaction to left power, but, to be honest, that might slide too far into groundless optimism even as we must recognize that there is nonetheless a certain truth to it. The right really does react to left power. In fact, the right sees the left as more powerful than the left sees the left! The right excoriated [Obama as a communist](#)—which is awesome because it means that they think the left is so powerful that we can get a communist in the White House! (There was a [stupid song and video](#) by Victoria Jackson from SNL called, I think, “There’s a communist living in the White House” that came out soon after Obama was elected.) The NRA presents any step toward even the [slightest regulation of guns](#) as socialism—again, good for us, because it presents us a powerful force. And, you probably saw that [Steve Bannon recently said](#) that the anti-patriarchy movement is going to be bigger than the Tea Party. “Time’s up on ten thousand years of recorded history. This is coming. This is real!” Right-wing hysteria, then, provides some pretty good grounds for left optimism.

But, if we want to be a bit more measured in our analysis of the objective conditions, we can say that the “Trumpian rebellion” is a reaction to a set of different and combined developments. Yes, there are the forces of extreme inequality and the failure of the left to maintain a vigilant, widespread, and clear vision of socialism, together with a decline in white men’s sense of their life chances, that is, in the likelihood that their lives will be better than their fathers’ lives and the sense that Hollywood and Democratic elites are mocking them. We also see an allied fear of the increased economic and political presence of heretofore marginalized groups: a fear compounded when they see the power of people standing up and fighting back, like with Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and the movements against aggressive policing, fossil fuels, debt, eviction, and deportation—all of which were going on under Obama.

So, yes, the left has more potential and more capacity than we realize, and we should understand “realize” here both as “recognize” and as “make real.” Our capacity has to be realized in practice, that is, through organizing, which is exactly what the IWS intends.

**In Fortunes of Feminism, Nancy Fraser contributes to the deeply uncomfortable but necessary effort to confront the history of second-wave feminism’s often unconscious susceptibility to being absorbed by and serving the needs of capital “in the shift from state-organized capitalism to neoliberalism.” This is, of course, a subject [you’ve addressed yourself](#) on many occasions, and it certainly seems to be a self-conscious staple of the movement behind IWS—and not just because Fraser herself is on the National Planning Committee. What really stands out, though, is [when Fraser suggests](#) that, in the wake of neoliberalism’s structural crises—from the Great Recession to the Trumpian takeover—feminism might yet emerge as something radically reformed, in both the sense of a concrete social movement but also as “an empty signifier of the good (akin, perhaps, to “democracy”), which can and will be invoked to legitimate a variety of different scenarios, not all of which promote gender justice.” Is this how we should be trying to understand what’s happening with IWS and, more broadly, with feminist politics today? What kind of shift does that require in how we think about and live feminism?**

Super interesting question. My first impulse was to say that it was Clinton’s feminism that functioned as an “empty signifier of the good,” that it is the mainstream white liberal capitalist carceral feminism of “progressive neoliberalism” (Fraser’s apt term) that circulates effortlessly through popular culture as a soft marker of the woke. It functions ideologically to reinforce capitalism, to provide capitalist brutality with a woman’s face. So, we get Lena Dunham feminism, Katy Perry feminism, and the reduction of political struggle to personal self-advancement. This is what immediately came to mind with feminism as an “empty signifier of the good” invoked to legitimate a variety of different scenarios.

But then of course I would not want to associate IWS with this kind of feminism! Part of the issue is the utility of a concept like “empty signifier.” I don’t think it tells us very much. In the instance of feminism, the different uses of “feminism” don’t point to the emptiness of “feminist” as a signifier. “Feminism” always signifies a politics focused on improving women’s lives. The different uses or understandings come from the real political divisions over what

improvement entails. The tension or difference is around what is to be done, the diagnosis of the problem and the recommended solution. The signifier isn't empty. Rather, the politics necessary for realizing it are contested, divergent, at odds with one other. Put in the old-school terms of 1980s women's studies: there are different feminisms, liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, etc. IWS's Feminism for the 99 percent is anti-racist socialist feminism. Rather than thinking that feminism can be reduced to liberal emphases on access and opportunity, anti-racist socialist feminism seeks to overturn the structures of women's oppression—white supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, the carceral and imperialist state. It recognizes that these are a single formation and that the politics they mobilize are different fronts of a common struggle.

My second impulse, though, went in the direction of thinking about why exactly feminism is at the vanguard of contemporary politics. The answer involves the renewed attention to feminist social reproduction theory as in the work of Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Della Costa, Selma James, Maria Mies, and others. Tithi Bhattacharya has an excellent [new edited volume](#) of work in this area, and Viewpoint magazine [published an issue](#) devoted to social reproduction a year or so ago. The UK-based activist group Plan-C has made social reproduction [a focal point](#) of their organizing. Canadian feminists have also been working in this area for a while now. Social reproduction is even becoming a force for organizers in small cities and rural communities. For example, the Geneva Women's Assembly in Geneva, New York, (where I live) has placed social reproduction at the center of our strike organizing and political work.

Fraser herself has written a couple of excellent articles on the current crisis of social reproduction. As I see it, social reproduction is the most exciting area of theoretical and practical work for feminists and socialists alike. It names the kind of inquiry that current conditions demand: how can we go on collectively, given the dramatic increases in inequality, militarism, and incarceration, and given the decrease in life expectancy and crumbling infrastructure such that basics like drinking water, schools, bridges, and roads are contaminated and decayed? Likewise, given the collapse of families, communities, and social institutions—and given the floods, fires, hurricanes, droughts, and other signs of climate-based catastrophe—how do we conceptualize the basic goals of our social order? Social reproduction focuses on the labor through which society reproduces itself. Much of this labor is unpaid. Much of it is done by women. All of it is necessary and all of it is under threat.

### **Can you say a little more about how social reproduction frames what we're seeing with the movement behind IWS?**

Traditional Marxist labor politics emphasizes organizing at the site of production because that's a place where the contradictions of capitalism are concentrated. The bosses want more work for less pay and the workers want more pay and less work.

The sphere of reproduction is also a site where capitalist contradictions appear. Consider everything that goes into the reproduction of the labor force: workers have to be born, cared for, housed, clothed, fed, educated, and transported. In contemporary capitalism, most households that include children do not also include full-time caregivers. The adult or adults in the family work full-time. Childcare is very expensive. The school-day and the work-day often don't correspond. There is a tension here, a contradiction between the conditions of labor and the conditions that produce laborers.

We can go further and note the absence of adequate and affordable housing in urban centers. The result is that more and more people face long commutes. But the transportation infrastructure—like most public services—has been left to decay. So, commutes take longer and are less reliable, which is very hard on parents who may then have to pay overtime for their childcare providers and even risk losing their spot in daycare because they haven't picked up their child on time. Let's add in the problem of adequate drinking water from lead contamination that plagues the United States, the over-crowded and under-funded schools, the extreme expense of health care, and, why not, the

opioid epidemic and decline in life expectancy because of the rise of diseases of despair. These problems are crises of the social, crises that impair the capacity of society to reproduce itself. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the 1 percent is a genocidal class. They want the rest of us to die. They have fought to eliminate (imprison and murder) black and brown people, and now their willingness to kill off the poor, the bottom quintile, is the thematic core of their politics. When markets determine everything, only the rich survive.

A women's strike brings to the fore the invisible labor that has sustained the system and that is under threat. It makes us all take notice of how much work is required just to survive and how the capitalists do everything to dispossess us of everything—social lives, time with friends and family, health, leisure, a future. The IWS platform calls for full-social provisioning, which means meeting social needs and securing the means of life. This call arises out of an analysis of social reproduction.

**So, it's kind of obvious, but still important to note that the very makeup of twentieth-century popular labor movements helped to reify common notions of what did and didn't count as *work*, who the *workers* were, and also, as a result, where worker solidarity began and ended. This is something that IWS is addressing head on. There's a really powerful line in the [IWS Platform](#): "As working women who hold up half the sky we refuse to be divided over the kind of labor we perform, whether skilled or unskilled, formal or informal, sex work and domestic work." The stated refusal to be divided is kind of a double gesture, looking backward at past divisions at the same time it's looking forward towards a horizon of solidarity. What does—or what should—solidarity really mean here? Can we still call this a kind of *class solidarity* or is it something else?**

IWS is building class solidarity through feminism. I am reminded here of Claudia Jones's insight into black women's triple oppression—as black, as women, as workers. The analysis of triple oppression is what enables us to see how different workers are connected, how the capitalist system deploys racism and patriarchy to divide the working class, keep wages suppressed, supply some workers with little advantages over others that they can enjoy (the man who comes home to a wife, the white woman able to boss around the black woman cleaning her home). The little advantages are the ways the capitalist system tries to inoculate itself against a strong and united working class. Anti-racist socialist feminism organizing demonstrates that this trick is a means of oppression and exploitation, that it is no substitute for actual equality. Under capitalism, class struggle permeates every aspect of our lives. When money buys freedom, when money is necessary for the exercise of one's liberty or rights, only the rich are free.

Women are at the forefront of the new working-class politics, the politics unfolding across the social field, from workplaces and neighborhoods to prisons and pipelines. We see it in the initiatives of hotel workers, domestic workers, restaurant workers, teachers, and nurses. We see it in the struggle against the carceral state. We see it in campaigns for environmental justice. All of these are fronts in today's class war. The bourgeoisie, the ruling class, the 1 percent don't have to amass in the streets. Corporations own the political system. Rich people don't protest; they buy the politicians they need (just ask Charles Koch and Rebekah Mercer). The widespread work of radical women organizers hammers home the fact that women have always been part of the working class, whether they were working in the factories or managing consumption in the domestic sphere. Marx knew this even as some twentieth-century labor organizers forgot it. Working-class struggles always exceed union struggles—just think of tenant organizing, hunger marches, CPUSA's anti-lynching campaigns, anti-war work, not to mention the social and community support work necessary for labor strikes to endure and succeed. Today's crisis of social reproduction is not felt by the 1 percent, with their offshore accounts, private schools, private planes, and multiple houses. It's felt by the proletarianized, by the people as *the rest of us*.

Under capitalism, solidarity isn't automatic. It doesn't follow spontaneously from the fact of shared conditions. It always has to be built, sustained, renewed. Strikes are of course a key training ground for solidarity—they require it and they inspire it. Workers have to stand together; they have to support each other to remain united even in the face of the real material hardship of striking.

And strikes depend on the families and communities of the workers as wellâ€”the workers need to see others seeing them as fighting the good fight. Solidarity, then, is unity in struggleâ€”standing together and having each other’s back. It means not letting the capitalists with their ideologies of individualism and competition divide us. With respect to the broad terrain of today’s class war, solidarity demands commitment to collectivity, to collective struggle and collective solutions. People have to keep their eye on the enemy, the racist, patriarchal, capitalist system, and not let themselves get sidetracked into moralism, sectarianism, and what have you.

The IWS represents a broad, multi-tendency left politics that recognizes the multiple forms and sites of work and the interlocking nature of oppression. It aims to make women’s work visible, oppose the deep and varied forms of violence that pervade our society, and push us toward the reorganization of society such that “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

[The Baffler](#)

PS:

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