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Obituary

Leonora Lloyd (1940-2002)

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THE death of Leonora Lloyd on January 23 at the young age of 61 has deprived the movement of a dedicated fighter for socialism, for feminism and above all for a woman's right to control her own fertility.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/leonora.gif>]

Leonora died only 18 days after the celebration of her father Charlie van Gelderen's life which took place on January 5 following his death in October last year. [1] She was determined to speak there though she was obviously fighting to overcome the pain her illness brought.

All Leonora's life she was a fighter. She was born in Cape Town in November 1940, although her family had moved to London in the 1930's. But her father was away in the army so her mother, Millie Matthews, returned to South Africa to be with her family. She grew up in Richmond in an intensely political atmosphere and joined the Labour League of Youth at 14. In 1960 she was arrested outside the South African embassy in protest at the Sharpeville massacre. She joined the International Marxist Group in the late 1960's and left in the early 1980's. She remained a committed socialist all her life.

But for many, it is for her contribution to the struggle for women's liberation in Britain that Leonora will be most remembered.

In 1968 Leonora was involved in the setting up of NJACCWER, the Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights. This followed on from the famous Ford machinists' strike of 1968. The strike was not formally about equal pay, but it was certainly concerned with the principle of equal pay for work of equal value; the principle that would be central to the Equal Pay Act which became law in 1970.

NJACCWER launched a charter which took up issues beyond the Equal Pay question - also calling for equality of opportunity for women in employment, education and public life, promising to "keep on fighting until the women of this country have full rights in every sphere". In practice however, it campaigned only for Equal Pay. The highlight of its existence was an Equal Pay demonstration in May 1969.

NJACCWER was undoubtedly central to ensuring the passage of the 1970 Act. But its work should have continued afterwards to ensure the legislation was implemented as employers tried to get round its provisions. Unfortunately the organisation failed to live up to this challenge, which is why the IMG subsequently launched the Working Women's Charter campaign - which took up the same demands as NJACCWER but also broadened out to issues as abortion and contraception.

Leonora was one of the founders of Socialist Woman, a magazine launched by the International Marxist Group in 1969 as the voice for a network of Socialist Women's groups. The pages of the early Socialist Woman are a testament to the important role of socialist feminists in the creation of the broader women's liberation movement in Britain. Leonora's first contributions to the magazine concentrated on equal pay for women, though she also wrote a number of book and film reviews.

However the particular role for which Leonora is most remembered is the central role she played in the creation and sustaining of the National Abortion Campaign, which was founded in 1975.

Limited abortion law reform had taken place in Britain in 1967, but suffered a series of sustained attacks through the mid-70s. A series of MPs, backed by the extremely well organised anti-abortion lobby funded and organised by the Catholic Church, launched assault after assault on the rights won through that legislation. In between battling off restrictive legislation, the campaign also fought for positive legislation that would go beyond the 1967 Act and enshrine a woman's right to choose in law.

In all of this and more Leonora was so often at the centre. She spoke at countless meetings, in particular understanding the importance of winning support from the trade unions for a woman's right to choose. The huge demonstrations that NAC organised in opposition to each successive attempt to restrict our rights would not have been possible without the huge support generated amongst the ranks of trade union women.

For many women, this battle to defend and extend women's control over our fertility was the first contact with the ideas of the women's liberation movement. This fight also challenged the idea that the role of trade unions was only to take up issues of pay and conditions - rather than to fight on all the issues that affect working people - and working class women in particular.

At the same time as playing a high profile, leadership role, no task was too small for Leonora. She went from public debates with anti-abortionists under the bright lights of the TV cameras, back to the chaotic NAC office to get out yet another mailing. She was everywhere, inspiring others with her conviction that without control over our bodies, women would never have control over our lives.

She was particularly proud of the Schools Kit that she developed for NAC - it was vital to her that younger women should not suffer the return to the backstreets that women who had grown up before the 1967 Act had lived through - at the cost of so many lives.

Leonora also understood that the battle for abortion rights was an international struggle. When NAC was launched in 1975, women in France active in MLAC (Mouvement pour la Liberté de L'avortment et de la contraception - Movement for free abortion and contraception) hosted the first international conference on abortion, contraception and sterilisation attended by women from Europe, the United States and Latin America.

The Supreme Court in Germany had just thrown out a more advanced abortion law than that in place at the time, and abortion clinics in Italy were under attack from the right. The conference led to greater co-ordination of battles across Europe with an international solidarity demonstration being organised in Italy in October 1975. In 1978, Leonora organised for NAC to host the second conference here in Britain in June of that year. This internationalism was to remain an important thread of her political activity.

Many of the restrictions on women's rights that motivated Leonora to devote so much of her life to the fight for socialist feminist ideas have still not been won .

In Britain anti-abortionists are currently bringing a court case to prevent the sale of the morning after pill in pharmacies. Earlier this year 17 women walked free in Portugal after being prosecuted for using an illegal abortion clinic - but there are no legal clinics available. [In this issue](#), we report on the current attacks in Ireland, with the referendum on abortion on March 6.

One way we can pay tribute to Leonora is to step up our own commitment to those battles.

[1] see [IV336](#) and [IV337](#).