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Belgium

After the strike of 8 March: we continue!

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A new international feminist wave

For the third consecutive year, 8 March, International Women's Day, saw the birth of women's strikes as well as massive and joyous demonstrations in hundreds of cities, mainly in Latin America and Europe.

This reflects the growing role of women's movements in social struggles around the world, as in India or Brazil with the #Ele Nao mobilization; a new feminist wave is sweeping the world. As the slogan of the movement #NiUnaMenos #VivasNosQueremos puts it: "We strike, we organize, and we meet each other; we are putting into practice the world in which we want to live." It is a feminism of struggles against the system, denouncing capitalism and the multiple violences done to women that this system sets up or favours, to increase the domination and the exploitation suffered by women.

The Spanish women's massive strike last year showed that it was possible. The impressive mobilizations in Argentina, Italy, but also in so many other countries in recent years have allowed us to rely on living examples, united in their diversity, to make the oppression of women visible and fight against it. The freeing of speech generated by #metoo has certainly also played a crucial role and made this broad mobilization possible.

The women's movement is not unified, it is multiple, hundreds of accumulated experiences and collectives are created, varied in space and time but all focused on the urgency to stop all forms of violence against women and femicide, as well as super-exploitation and growing precariousness: a powerful anti-capitalist movement.

And in Belgium, for the first time...

This 8 March in Belgium, did not bring together hundreds of thousands of women as elsewhere. But we had a historic moment: it was the first feminist national women's strike. A different strike, based on four axes: a strike of wage labour, but also a strike in care, a student strike and a consumption strike, taking up the slogan: "when women stop, the world stops". It is difficult to quantify this success, but in many cities in Belgium, thousands of women mobilized and/or went on strike and made themselves 'visible' by their absence in their daily tasks. The main unions, the CSC and the FGTB, supported the strike, making this broad mobilisation possible.

Other actions took place everywhere throughout the day: strike pickets in several enterprises, reading of demands, work stoppages in very feminised sectors such as local government, hospitals, associations, medical centres, public social welfare centres, stores, family planning centres, disturbances to rubbish collections in over 10 Brussels municipalities, a strike of women workers in the European Parliament, and actions of civil disobedience (for example renaming all the Brussels metro stations with women's names).

In Louvain-la-Neuve, 500 people demonstrated, 500 others took part in the Women's Strike Festival in Antwerp. There were rallies in several cities like Mons or Tournai. 7,000 people joined the feminist cycle parade in Liège. In Brussels, the nerve centre of mobilization, activities were held all day long, with meetings in the morning devoted to anti-racism, L (g) BTQI struggles, violence, paid work, care and ecology, Free speech was organized, making the voices of undocumented women, single mothers and every woman who wanted to express themselves heard. The

atmosphere was one of struggle but was also festive, with concerts. At 2 pm, a gathering was held to make noise, express our anger and make our voices heard. A highlight of the gathering was the reading of the demands, in French, Dutch, English, Spanish and Arabic (in written form, the demands were translated into 8 languages). Striking workers affiliated to the unions were also present in a common front. At the end of the day, in an atmosphere of protest and festivity, nearly 15,000 people joined the protest organized by the World March of Women. The enthusiasm of the demonstrators led to a diversion of the procession, preferring to cut off the traffic on the main roads rather than quietly parade in the small streets of the official route.

Factors of success

Around May-June 2018, the Collecti.e.f 8 maars was created (the spelling symbolizes Belgian linguistic inclusion and the will to address both French and Flemish speakers) at the initiative of some young women inspired by the Spanish strike a few months earlier. From October to March, this collective organized monthly open meetings, whose non-mixed character was announced from the offset to open a space for women to speak, systematically providing translation, day care and food sharing and bringing together a hundred women (not always the same ones).

The collecti.e.f quickly organized into several commissions: actions, communication, demands, trade union, inclusivity, international and so on. All the commissions were connected by a national coordination. Some thematic and geographical working groups have also been organized. One condition for joining the Collecti.e.f was to participate as an individual, and not on behalf of an organization.

Collectively building a set of demands

It was important to clarify what motivates this women's strike and the goals of this mobilization. It was very quickly evident that March 8, 2019 was the first step in a long-term dynamic to build a balance of power that would allow concrete progress for all women in all fields. A manifesto of demands has been built collectively to detail all this. Violence, salaried or reproductive work, sexuality, but also migration, ecology and decolonization are discussed. The idea was to make very broad demands so that each woman or group of women could appropriate them: to discuss, to refine them, to nourish them on the basis of their own experiences.

The construction of the demands was made progressively in the meetings but also through participation in other mobilizations, like anti-fascist, trade union or climate mobilizations. For example, the discussions of the 3rd meeting led to an anti-fascist position in reaction to a demonstration of 5,000 fascists that was taking place that day in Brussels.

An important step for the discussion of the demands was the organization of an entire weekend devoted to thematic workshops: anti-racism, violence, care, paid work (with the participation of domestic workers in particular), and LGBTQI struggles. During this weekend, the creative aspect was not ignored (and persisted in the actions that preceded and took place on March 8): screen printing workshops to make scarves, badge workshops, radio reports and so on.

Participation of trade unions

The "trade union" commission has established contacts with several union activists who have won the support of their organizations, a rather unexpected support for this first attempt at a feminist strike. For example, several unions from the major federations, the CSC and the FGTB, have filed notices, mobilized their members or provided material support. This support from the trade union structures, but also initiatives of convergence such as the feminist cycle parade organized by the Collecti.ef with pickets from the national strike of February 13, facilitated the involvement of unionized women workers, to lead the debate on the appropriateness of the strike and the modalities of mobilization within workplaces but also to support the movement of the concerns and demands made by women employees within their sectors and workplaces.

This convergence between the Collecti.ef and the union activists represented a key element for the growth and visibility of the movement, winning credibility through the official support of the trade unions, having the strike talked about within workplaces and arousing the interest of the media, which in turn helped to make the movement more widely known in families and neighbourhoods.

Mobilisation must continue

This strike day on March 8 was for many a first encouraging experience and an awareness of the strength of women and the importance of building an autonomous women's movement.

How can such a success for this first edition of the feminist women's strike be explained? In addition to some of the aspects mentioned above, it is very clear that we owe this success to international feminist struggles. The very presence of many Argentinean, Spanish or Italian women in the Collecti.e.f is proof of this. And we cannot forget the current political and social context of these thousands of young people mobilized for the climate every week and the struggle of the *gilets jaunes*.

This success also poses the need for convergence of struggles, a central and complex issue. Which raises the need for an intersectional feminism, which does not envisage in a separate or hierarchical way feminist struggles and social, climatic, indigenous, peasant, anti-racist, decolonial and internationalist struggles.

In the wake of the workshops held in Brussels on March 8th, the Collecti.e.f has mobilized to take part in other actions in March, such as the climate and anti-racism events. The Collecti.e.f also organized a counter-demonstration against the anti-abortion movement on March 31st. During this last activity more than 300 women occupied the space and held a meeting on the situation in relation to abortion in Belgium and in the world, in particular in support of women in struggle in Italy.

Without running out of steam, it is now time to prepare for the strike of March 8, 2020, so that it is even stronger than in 2019. Several weaknesses noted this year are to be overcome, notably ensuring that the movement is more accessible to all women, that the demands relate more to those of us who experience multiple oppressions, and that the movement is more rooted outside of Brussels,

A feminism for the 99 %

For three years, an international appeal has been circulated to organize a women's strike. This call was relayed in more than 40 countries in 2019. This movement has invented new ways of striking and instilled a new type of politics into the very form of the strike.

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Women's strikes are multiplying today all over the world and relate to problems such as poverty wages, public systems which are non-existent or dysfunctional, climate disaster, the rejection of migrants, police violence and so on. These movements bear witness to the fact that feminist claims are not isolated from those of other movements.

In 2016, the "Ni una di meno" movement in Italy became one of the main forces opposing Salvini's anti-migrant, racist and fascist policies. In Spain, the March 8 movement is involved in the mobilisations against closed centres for migrants, for decent housing for all. In Argentina and elsewhere, the heart of the feminist movement's commitment is against all forms of violence against women, but also against all types of oppression and the destruction of the planet. We must fight this system that grinds us down, we must impose the radical changes we want.

A manifesto for a feminism of the 99% is circulating internationally. In simple and clear terms, it calls on women to mobilize locally and internationally:

"Only in this way - by connecting with anti-racists, environmentalists, and labor and migrant right activists - can feminism rise to the challenge of our time... Feminism must rise to the occasion of the current crisis. As we said, this is a crisis that capitalism can at best displace but cannot solve. A true resolution requires nothing less than an entirely new form of social organization." (Cinzia Arruza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, Verso, London 2019).

PS:

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