

# COMMUNIST WOMEN



May 2020 Number 1

## The struggle for a new 'normal' for women starts now

### WOMEN

MOLLIE BROWN

**W**OMEN HAVE long borne the brunt of politically-driven austerity - in the workplace, the home and through the criminal justice system. How much more these stark inequalities come to the fore in a global pandemic.

Since Covid-19 engulfed the country we have had to try to build a new 'normal' in every aspect of our lives yet the CV-19 crisis places unheard of pressures on our NHS, schools, public transport, hospitality industry and manufacturing.

Workers in these industries have had years of pay cuts and freezes or have had workplace rights stripped back with zero-hours contracts and horrendous working conditions. Suddenly they become our 'key workers' - continuing to work throughout the worst pandemic of our lifetime, putting their own lives at risk daily.

Frontline health and care workers are particularly at risk of losing their lives, and the majority of these workers are women. Many have had to spend time away from their children to prevent spreading the virus. Despite these sacrifices our government still fails to fully provide desperately deserved and needed PPE.

Women are dying who have not contracted CV-19. Domestic abuse charities

reported a 50% rise in calls from those trapped with abusers during lockdown.<sup>1</sup> Between 23 March and 12 April, domestic abuse resulted in the deaths of 16 women - a terrifying rise from 2 to 5 per week for the same period over the past 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

Around 100 babies are born each year to women serving prison sentences. The current crisis puts them and their mothers at higher risks than before. As well as fears that CV-19 can spread rapidly through prison populations, poor hygiene, limited access to maternity care and lack of mental health support are all exacerbated by reduced staffing levels as prison officers self-isolate.<sup>3</sup> We demand the immediate release of pregnant women prisoners.

This is the worrying picture of the realities for many women and should serve as a wake-up call reminding us that a return to 'normal' after this pandemic poses a serious threat to women's lives. The struggle for a new 'normal' for women in Britain must start now.

MOLLIE BROWN IS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

- 1 <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/splash-domestic-abuse-1>
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-double-amid-covid-19-lockdown>
- 3 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/pregnant-women-prison-coronavirus-covid19-england-wales-a9416991.html>

24 May is International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament, initiated in the 1980's by women campaigning against nuclear weapons, calling for a peaceful, just and sustainable world. Our Party demands a 'Trident Dividend' - £150 billion for health and social care, emergency services and productive industry instead of weapons of mass destruction.



## Red Lives: 100 years for socialism

### COMMUNIST PARTY CENTENARY

A new centenary publication from the Communist Party, *Red Lives – 100 years for socialism* is soon to be published. It includes biographies of communist party members who have made a contribution to the struggle for socialism. There is a remarkable story and includes a significant number of women. Visit

<https://www.comunistparty.org.uk/red-lives-100-years-for-socialism> to view more.

Lifelong communist, Thora Silverthorne, was born in Abertillery, a South Wales mining town, in 1910 "where everyone talked politics." She joined the Young Communist League aged 16, qualifying as a nurse in 1931. She provided medical support to Hunger Marchers and volunteered for a Medical Unit in defence of republican Spain. On her return she established the National Nurses Association and as a secretary of the Socialist Medical Association, was one who helped shape the NHS at its foundation in 1948.

RED LIVES EDITORIAL TEAM

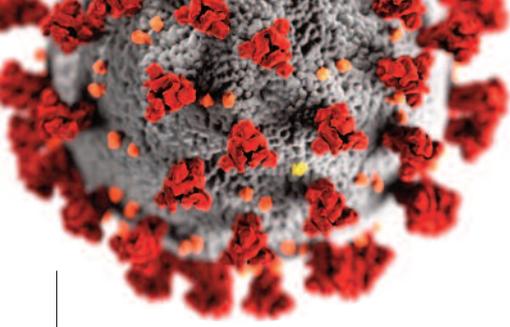
*Workers of all lands, unite*

[www.comunistparty.org.uk](http://www.comunistparty.org.uk)

 CP BRITAIN

 CP BRITAIN

Welcome to this first issue of *Communist Women* published by Communist Party women for themselves and supporters



## Political Statement to the Women's Commission

### POLITICS

CAROL STAVRIS

THE HANDLING of the pandemic in countries around the world shows stark differences between those governments defending the pursuit of profit and those putting their people first. Also, between authoritarian regimes and bourgeois democratic ones. Jair Bolsonaro's mishandling of the crisis has given Brazil one of the highest death rates in the world. After the 2008 financial crash, capitalism used Treasury money to bail out the banking system. The same method now is being used to prop up medium and large businesses by giving grants and paying furloughed workers out of public funds, even though some of the capitalist big business owners are multi-millionaires. Bigger companies will benefit in the long run as many smaller enterprises will fail to recover. The British government were very slow to act – because a) it did not have infrastructure or equipment in place ready to deal with crisis

## From 4-6 March 2020 over three hundred women gathered at Congress House in London for the Women's TUC

LIZ PAYNE

GED NICHOLS, TUC president told a packed hall that years of austerity and dismantling of the benefits system had left Britain one of the most gender-unequal societies in the developed world. He urged we join together because "collective action works."

Francis O'Grady, TUC General Secretary said strong, growing unions could stand up to right-wing populism targeting trade-unionists, socialists and feminists and we must stand together and organise to push back sexism and racism in the workplace.

A composite motion entitled 'New Deal for Women Workers' pointed to the unacceptable gender pay gap in this the fiftieth anniversary year of the Equal Pay Act 1970, the segregation of women in low paid jobs and the huge number of women in uncertain work – including a high proportion of female

due to years of underfunding, privatisation and the many layers of outsourcing of the healthcare system.

b) it was not able to get resources and equipment ready in time for the same reasons.

c) it tried to minimise the dangers and suggested 'striking a balance' between 'draconian' measures (effectively cancelling public events, closing schools etc) and taking just sufficient action to help the NHS survive the peak of the disease.

However, once the virus hit and the deaths mounted, a blame game started – especially by the Trump administration. Pointing the finger at China and the World Health Organisation is for its own benefit – diverting attention from their own massive shortcomings and as a continuation of US economic attacks on China.

Johnson's government will try to use the situation to suit its own ends as was done in aftermath of 2008 and they may attempt to bring in politically-driven austerity to get the working class to pay for the crisis once again. Comprehensive pay freezes in the public sector have not been ruled out.

The emphasis and pressure now is to get workers back to work as soon as possible, even though there is no vaccine, or comprehensive testing and tracing methods in place for controlling the virus. Without proper safety plans, every worker will be on the front-line, risking their lives and those of their family members.

Ending or reducing payments through the furlough scheme would make it impossible for low-paid workers to survive without

agency workers.

This was voted as the Women's TUC motion for the full TU Congress in September. We urge all unions to promote its contents and fight for the implementation of its demands.

Other motions included a call to end discrimination for women in the UK who lose their jobs as a result of pregnancy despite legislation expressly forbidding this, and a condemnation of the plight of outsourced workers, the majority of them women on "very, very low pay."

Debates on women's health in the workplace covered major issues including period dignity, provision for women experiencing the menopause, women and malnutrition and work-related mental health issues including stress caused by huge understaffing in the NHS, schools and other sectors.

Motions on 'Public Services, Women and the State' covered the plight of hundreds of pregnant women prisoners given inadequate and sometimes abusive care; the desperate situation of migrant women charged an average of £6,000 for NHS maternity care and the disproportionate number of women and their children thrown into poverty and homelessness through years of austerity cuts in services.

returning to work. Many of these are very high risk occupations done disproportionately by women from BAME backgrounds. In consequence, our Black and Asian sisters are 4.3 times more likely to die from the virus as white women.

There will be huge unemployment as the country begins to come out of 'lockdown'. Many of the workers in the tourism, travel and hospitality industries are women. These industries have been particularly badly hit by the lockdown restrictions and will take months if not years to recover.

We have opportunities now to fight for a better system, for meaningful jobs that reflect the interconnected world in which we live and the global problems we face, through our trade unions, in our communities and by developing our international links:

Our demands:

- for sustainability in production.
- for fully resourced education, health, care and welfare systems that employ well-trained, well-paid professionals.
- for a reallocation of budgets to socially needed programmes away from vast sums spent on weapons of mass destruction and profits made from sales of armaments to despotic regimes
- Stepping up our demands for women - ending discrimination in pay, strengthening and improving on equality gains made and fighting for the lives of our sisters suffering oppression

22 May 2020

CAROL STAVRIS IS THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S WOMEN'S ORGANISER

Conference condemned the shocking level and absolute unacceptability of violence and abuse against women and girls. 'One violent crime a minute' – assaults at work, at home, on public transport, in the street and online both ruin and cost lives. A clear message was adopted on sexual harassment: It is never OK! A key to tackling this is through education – on the significance of consent and respect for appropriate boundaries.

Other motions focussed on human rights in Turkey, solidarity with the women of Latin America and the plight of Palestinian children.

A series of motions on education and young women included the importance of celebrating black women and girls in education, the imperative of relationship and sex education and support, sexist attitudes forming a barrier to the career progression of women teachers and the crucial need for better financial support for student midwives.

Inspiration, confidence and strength gained from unity inspire us as we go through difficult and dangerous days ahead to the massive struggle for our rights in a very changed post-COVID-19 Britain.

LIZ PAYNE IS CHAIR OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Abridged from an article which first appeared in the NAW newsletter *Sisters Spring* 2020