

GLOBAL WOMEN'S STRIKE

Women respond

**On International Women's Day, 8 March 2001,
women in over 60 countries went on strike
against no pay, low pay and too much work**

As in 2000 (see *Firefighter* Sept 2000) women took off whatever time they could from housework, childcare, waged jobs and farm work; put brooms outside their doors, sent e-mails to the government and in cities and villages in India, Uganda, Guyana, South America and across the USA and Europe, they demonstrated to drive home their global demands:

- **Payment for all caring work –in wages, pensions, land and other resources. What is more valuable than raising children and caring for others?**
- **Invest in life and welfare, not military budgets and prisons. Pay equity for all, women and men, in the global market.**
- **Paid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks and other benefits – stop penalising us for being women.**
- **Abolition of "Third World debt"**
- **Accessible clean water, healthcare, housing, transport, literacy.**
- **Non-polluting energy and technology which shortens the hours we work.**
- **Protection and asylum from all violence and persecution, including by family members and people in positions of authority.**
- **Freedom of movement. Capital travels freely, why not people?**

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In Los Angeles the Homecare Workers Union and the

Garment Workers Union called out their members, and the HWU organised a dramatic "banner drop" from the roof of their headquarters. In English and Spanish, the 30 foot high banner read: "Caring Work Counts, end no pay and low pay".

The LA County Federation of Labor donated \$500 and other resources. In Philadelphia, which last year launched the international pay equity petition, the local Coalition of Labour Union Women, AFL-CIO

(equivalent of the TUC) and AFSCME (roughly equivalent of UNISON) all sponsored a "Two-Hour Lunch Break for Women Against No Pay and Low Pay and for Pay Equity", and spoke at the lunchtime rally in City Hall.

In Argentina, the huge women's "multi-sectorial" united women from different unions normally bitterly divided along party lines, along with women journalists, pensioners and housewives, in support of the Strike and its demands, including "pensions without contributions for workers without wages". The Union of Public Employees issued their own GWS leaflets, and the bus employees union provided transport for strike events.

to globalisation

In Peru the Strike was called by CCTH – the union of domestic workers, who had always been seen as “the people who filled the halls, as if domestic work issues had nothing to do with the economic issues of the country.”

At a post-Strike London conference of women from 11 countries, a member explained what it means “for a day that’s so important as International Women’s Day, for domestic workers to be the ones to call the strike!” Many other unions supported and one leader announced, “Companeros, we must remember this strike is being called by our sisters, the domestic workers, the most exploited workers, living in a situation of slavery in their places of work.”]

In Spain one of the three major unions the CGT (Confederacion General del Trabajo) officially called for a national two-hour General Strike on International Women’s Day 8 March for two hours on every shift, day and night.

Their demands included “a social wage for all women workers in their own home. ... in cases of separation from their husband where the husband is at fault ...” – explicitly calling for housework and childcare to be recognised as “work” worthy of wages.

In London, a spectacular, loud and lively caravan led by a giant woman puppet paraded down Whitehall and around Parliament Square. Sex workers from Soho marched protesting raids and deportation of immigrant women; women with disabilities – some in wheelchairs – joined in, as did Black and immigrant women, “Dykes on Strike”, older women, mothers with push-chairs defending welfare benefits, women cyclists, Reclaim the Streets, and more.

Other cities with GWS activities included Sheffield, Liverpool, Brighton and Canterbury. Payday, who co-ordinated men’s support issued a startling collection of statements from men, spelling out how the Strike speaks to their needs. Union

participation in Britain was at a lower level than elsewhere, with some union officials reluctant to join forces with workers who, caring for others, have no wage at all. But strong support did come in, including from the FBU (thanks for a £100 donation!). National Women’s Committee secretary Vicky Knight had told the GWS about issues that women in the service face: equal pay for control room staff, parental leave and paid time off for maternity.

Like women in all male-dominated jobs, women firefighters in some places can face horrendous sexual harassment. And like workers in every public service, women and men in the FBU are fighting the mergers, cuts, and creeping privatisation that lead to worse conditions, and endanger both workers and lives and homes in the communities they serve.

All of these issues were brought out in the Strike, including through the participation of women hospital workers in Dudley – who sent a ringing endorsement to the London rally, and wore GWS badges and distributed materials in the hospitals where they are staving off the government’s privatising zeal. The day ended with a speakout and entertainment by the Frank Chickens, Songlines international choir, Red Jenn, and the Raya Crew, including firefighter Simon

Green, whose verdict on the day was, “this is as good as it gets”.

Model resolutions, pay equity petitions, leaflets and other materials for GWS 2002 are already under way. Do get in touch, or visit the website, and help make sure the needs and views of fire service workers are reflected!!

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