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Women/USA

The First Strike

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On March 8, International Women’s Day, formerly known as International Working Women’s Day, there was a global strike in the name of feminism. The combination of the strike and an explicitly left feminist agenda drew some criticism from Hillary-style Democrats, and even some people further to the left. It would be too small, too radical, too adventurous to make any kind of political difference.

But March 8 showed that, despite such criticisms, women in the United States were drawn to the political project signaled by the women’s strike. The “Day Without a Woman” saw three school districts close and protests across the country.

Yet the action’s organizers aren’t stopping there; instead, they are already mobilizing for May Day. To discuss March 8’s mobilization, the goals of the women’s strike, and the movement going forward, journalist Doug Henwood spoke to Women’s Strike organizer Cinzia Arruzza, for *Jacobin*’s Behind the News podcast.

Below, a lightly edited transcript of their conversation. [Jacobin]

How did this idea for a women’s strike come up?

The idea came up after the [Polish women’s strike](#) and the [women’s strike in Argentina](#). It was launched by the Polish feminist activists; they were the ones who started working on this project in the fall.

Of course, one big motivation to do so was the extraordinary success of the women’s strike in Poland that managed to stop the abortion ban and to actually give birth to a new feminist movement. Also, the success of the women’s strikes and the demonstrations seen in Argentina.

[In January](#), when we thought of organizing the women’s strike, the international organization of the strike was already going on. We were actually late in the game. The reason we thought it was possible to organize this in the United States had to do with the success of the women’s marches in January. We saw that, given the enormous mobilization of women in January against Trump’s administration, there could be some willingness to also engage women’s strike on a more radical platform.

The strike in Poland, although it was inspired by the abortion ban, did acquire a broader agenda than that, didn’t it?

Yes. Of course the immediate goal was to stop the abortion ban, but the strike was also against gender violence more generally. Especially after the mobilizations in Argentina, the call for the international women’s strike had to do with reproductive justice but also with violence against women very broadly understood.

For example, it considered economic “slow violence” — the violence of policies that destroy welfare state, public services, and also the casualization of labor that impacts especially women. The concept was also broadened to include state violence, in terms, for example, of migration policies or wars that clearly affect women in significant ways.

The idea also was also to give the autonomy to the various feminist groups in the various countries to actually elaborate their own platform, to adjust the platform and demands according to the needs and the concrete situation in each country.

I would say in general the character of the strike was actually much broader than the usual left feminist mobilization on, for example, reproductive justice and gender violence, because it addressed issues of racism, colonial wars, and economic policies.

What was the agenda for the US women's strike?

For the United States, we put together an expansive agenda that included demands concerning the welfare state "universal health care and public services, reproductive services" and also a minimum wage of fifteen dollars and pay equality. It is very important to combine those two things because clearly wage equality across genders can be achieved also by compressing male wages to the bottom. It's not sufficient just to demand wage equality.

Then we had a very strong profile in terms of antiracism, opposition to white supremacy, opposition to US wars, imperialist wars, and also the opposition to [Israel's policies](#) in Palestine. We demanded the decolonization of Palestine, which was probably one of the most controversial demands in our agenda, as we were attacked for this demand that was actually key to our platform. We also articulated demands concerning support in favor of indigenous women, especially in [Standing Rock](#).

The idea was to have a platform that addressed the various problems that affect women in a different way according to class, gender, ethnicity, race, or ability. The idea was, in order to have a really universalistic platform, a platform that responded to the demands and needs of the larger majority of women, we needed to emphasize the demands and needs of the most oppressed women, which means immigrant women, women of color, working-class women.

Otherwise, the risk is to put forward very generic demands for women's rights that actually don't take into account the fundamental differences in conditions of life and social situation of the women who live in the country.

The women's march that happened just after Trump's inauguration was criticized for [not having any demands at all](#). I've heard people criticize your women's strike for having demands that would alienate a broad constituency. I guess women can't do anything right. How do you respond to that critique?

First of all, it is not entirely true that the women's march did not have demands. It is true they elaborated a platform only in a second moment, and the platform was relatively progressive, as it included demands concerning minimum wage and social provisioning.

Clearly, the mass mobilization for the women's marches can be explained also by the fact that although the platform was there, this was not the main mobilizing factor. The main mobilizing factor was opposition to Trump, which means that the people who participated in the marches had not necessarily the same politics, or did not necessarily embrace radical left politics. Certainly, they shared in common an opposition to Trump.

[Our platform](#) was set to be more radical and also more articulated, but the reason why we chose to do this was precisely because we wanted to make an intervention in the feminist debate in the United States, and also in the process rebuild a feminist movement for the 99 percent in the United States.

What we wanted to rebuild was precisely a class and left perspective within the feminist movement. In order to do this, we needed to articulate a more complex and more radical platform that would allow us to build a bridge among

social groups and women working on different issues and putting forward different struggles.

In a sense, the platform was meant to work as a catalyst, to carry on the work of the re-groupment of the various struggles that are going on in the country.

We were perfectly aware that the size of the women's strike would not be the same as the size of the women's marches. This was impossible because, again, the profile of the strike was much more defined and much more on the Left, but this was a precise choice because we felt that our contribution would be significant precisely in delineating a leftist current within the feminist movement.

You've also been criticized for using the word "strike," since this was not rooted in traditional union activity. It was too ambitious. You were calling a strike that would not have mass participation. How do you plead on that?

The most obvious and defensive response could be that we did not invent the name of the day of action. This was again already called as a women's strike internationally. But this would be a defensive response.

We actually have a more political response, in the sense that appropriating the term "strike" for a day of action for the feminist movement had various meanings and played various roles. First of all, we wanted to make visible the labor that women perform not only in the workplace, but also outside of the workplace, in the sphere of social reproduction.

This work isn't paid in most cases, but it is [nonetheless work](#), and should be recognized as such. This is why the women's strike was very different as a concept from a general strike because it was a strike not only from work in the workplace, but also from unpaid work outside of the workplace.

Secondly, I think the meaningfulness of using the term "strike" had also to do with emphasizing the fact that women are also workers, and allowing women to identify themselves not only as women but also as workers.

Thirdly, I think that it is very important to relegitimize the term "strike" in United States. This is not a very popular notion, politically speaking. As a matter of fact, the women's march had quite an amount of pushback from their constituency that was challenging the notion of a strike. But not from, say, the perspective of labor organizers being worried that we are misusing the term "strike." Criticism came from people who do not have any sympathy for strike as a form of struggle. From this viewpoint, I think it was very important to reintroduce the notion of striking within the political language in the United States and to relegitimize it.

Finally, we were also hoping to have some strikes in workplaces. We were particularly aware that given the labor laws in the United States, these strikes would not be formal strikes because labor laws prevent workers from organizing political strikes.

From this viewpoint, the day of action was very successful because three entire school districts closed on March 8. For example, in [Prince George County School District](#), apparently 1,700 teachers asked for a day off, and 30 percent of the transportation staff. These are big numbers.

The next step would then be to understand who organized this. I am skeptical that 1,700 teachers decided to take a day off without having any kind of even informal network, but I think the fact that three districts shut down showed that there is willingness and readiness to take some more radical actions in the workplace. This is a very important signal for working on organizing in the workplace.

I'm sorry to keep reciting criticisms of your action, but another one is that you had [no sympathy for women](#) who are tenuously employed. It would be too risky for them to strike. How could they have the nerve, to let's say, walk out, when they could lose their jobs as a result?

First of all, we didn't ask women to walk out and lose their job. We asked women to organize a strike in the workplace, where they thought the conditions were in place to do so.

The idea that you shouldn't call for a women's strike because this would be an [action for privileged women](#) because only privileged women can strike is offensive to working-class and migrant women and women of color. It's extremely patronizing. It is also antihistorical. First of all, precisely the most vulnerable women in terms of social status, race, or citizenship status are the ones who have played a [crucial role](#) in all the mobilizations of recent years.

In doing so, they clearly have faced a number of risks. The idea that we should have some form of patronizing attitude toward them, telling them what they can or they cannot do, is extremely offensive. It doesn't really take into account the agency of these women, who can decide for themselves the risk they can take or they cannot take.

In addition to this, these kinds of criticism came from feminists who have supported Hillary Clinton's campaign, and who tended then to suggest that a more effective form of protest would be to call Democratic representatives. I think the real political intention behind these kinds of accusations was to downplay a potentially radical action taken by women, an attempt to identify in the Democratic Party the political force that will solve our problems.

Clearly, our day of action was precisely to state the opposite. We cannot expect to be saved from Trump by the Democratic Party. We need to take action ourselves, and by the way, we need to take action not only against Trump, but in general against neoliberal and racist policies, even when they are carried out by the Democratic Party.

You used a phrase a little while ago: the "political strike." People are more familiar with economic strikes. What is a political strike exactly, and what are the relations between it and an economic strike?

This is a concept that is not familiar in the United States precisely because there are no or very few political strikes, and they are not formal political strikes. In a number of countries, political strikes are allowed, and they are strikes that do not have at their core specific economic demands related to the renewal of a contract or a negotiation on the workplace.

It can be strikes, for example, against general policies carried out by a government. For example, one of the biggest general strikes in Italy was the 1994 strike against Berlusconi's reform of the pension system with the participation of millions of workers. This was decisive in the fall of the first [Berlusconi government](#).

Usually, political strikes take on the government, rather than an individual employer or an economic measure within a specific workplace or firm. In this sense, clearly the women's strike was a political strike. It was not an economic strike because it was a strike based on a political platform and clearly addressed against a government.

It seems that reactionary governments — you mentioned Poland, and it has one of those, and the Trump administration — seem to have a special place in their heart for misogyny. Is that a correct perception?

Yeah, of course. In recent years we have seen — and this is also why it is so important to rearticulate a clearly left feminism, not only in the United States but worldwide — the co-optation of elements of the feminist discourse by conservative and reactionary racist governments.

For example, [Islamophobic policies](#) are very often justified on the basis of pseudo-feminist discourses. The use of this pseudo-feminist discourse also hides the fact that the concrete policies carried out by conservative governments usually target women: for example, policies centered around reproductive rights and reproductive justice – particularly abortion – but also targeting women on a socioeconomic level by destroying the welfare state or public services.

Certainly misogyny, both implicit in the policies carried down and explicit in the statements of political figures such as Trump or Berlusconi, is part of conservative politics.

There was a critique that there was something wrong with singling out women, having this be a women's strike, and not something that included men. How do you react to that?

Honestly, in the organization of the women's strike, we had the help and support of a lot of men. I'm not sure how strong this position is. It is very vocal on social media. I'm not sure how much it really represents a widespread feeling or an opposition among men on the Left. I would be more optimistic.

That said, I think the accusation is absurd in the sense that there is the tendency to think that by emphasizing struggles on issues that are key for specific sectors of the working class, for example, race, one then gives up about universalistic political projects. I would say it is the other way around.

Of course, there is a risk of falling into a kind of identity politics that makes solidarity and universalistic politics impossible. We have seen this in the last two decades. However, I don't think the correct political response to this is to then suggest that we should make abstraction from differences and hierarchies that are in any case produced by capitalism and divide the working class.

On the contrary, I think the only way to achieve truly universalistic political projects of transformation of social relations is by identifying these hierarchies and these differences, and by articulating demands and critiques that are specific to these different conditions.

From this viewpoint, I would suggest that we'll achieve true universalistic politics when we will manage to combine together all the various demands and perspectives and critiques that relate to these various positions within the social structure. This is what we tried to do with the women's strike.

The women's strike was not based on a strong notion of identity, but rather pointed to the necessity of building a bridge among various women – for example, Muslim women, black women, immigrant women from South America or Central America, working-class women, and so on. The way to do this was not by hiding the differences, but by combining together the various demands in a single platform.

I think the underlying message is, "Shut up. Your time will come."

I think this is a social media phenomenon, because in actual organizing, we had a lot of solidarity from men on the Left. At the same time, I must say that if March 8 had been an international day of action and mobilization not on a feminist platform, it would have been welcomed with more widespread enthusiasm.

The fact that it was a feminist international mobilization explains a large part of the critiques we've received. This is very unfortunate. At the same time, once again, I do think that this is a minority of internet leftists. We can also ignore this phenomenon.

The First Strike

I hope you're right on that one. Finally, you didn't conceive this as a one-off thing. You're still continuing. There will be more events, more organizing in the future, correct?

Yes, we have just decided that we want to continue working together on a national level because this experience was absolutely positive from all viewpoints, also from the viewpoint of the capacity of working together and building solidarity and trust and cooperation among the organizers, who had never worked together previously.

We have identified May Day as the next big national mobilization that we want to contribute to build. The idea is to try to build a very strong left feminist participation in the May Day mobilizations.

You have a little bit more time to organize for May Day than you did for this one. So how can people who want to get involved sign up?

They can write to us. We have a website, and they can email us. We are also creating our database of local contacts and hopefully we will be able to provide a network of activists on a national level, who can then be reference points for those who want to get involved and get organized and participate.

Source: 6 April 2017 [Jacobin](#).

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