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Women

# Feminism: Why a women\*'s strike on March 8?

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**Since October 2018, women\* from different social and political backgrounds have been gathering together once a month in Brussels to organize a feminist women\*'s strike on March 8, 2019. [1]** The assemblies are open to all women\*, trans, intersex and non-binary people affected and revolted by the violence of the patriarchal system. This system oppresses women\* and people with gender identities and sexualities that do not conform to male-heterosexual norms.

Participation in the meetings is free, activities are planned for children, translations are arranged according to need, and biscuits are shared! The Collecti.e. f 8 maars is the bilingual name for the structure built through the meetings with the primary purpose of organizing a national strike of women\* on March 8 .... and, most likely, beyond!

Several members of Gauche anticapitaliste (Anti-capitalist Left, the Belgian section of the Fourth International) are actively involved in the construction of this movement and the many meetings. In this article, we explain why it seems essential to participate in the strike on March 8 but especially why we believe it is the responsibility of an anti-capitalist, feminist and revolutionary group to get involved in its organization, while respecting the autonomy and internal democracy of the movement.

# 1. A women\*'s strike, something new?

Since the beginnings of capitalism, and particularly since the economic crisis of the 1970s, work has become increasingly feminized. Today, women\* represent a little less than half of employees (against +/- 30% in the 80s). At the same time, working conditions are deteriorating, real wages are falling, and part-time work is becoming more widespread.

Women\*'s wages are still structurally considered as "extra pay" while those who work also care for and support the needs of the people around them. In addition, women\* are pushed into care professions (health, education) and service professions that require great flexibility (cleaning, distribution). Under these conditions, 90% of part-time work is imposed on women\* who will never be able to obtain the recognition of a complete career even if they multiply daily their working days. Undocumented women\* are the majority in informal work (domestic work, hospitality, prostitution) and non-white (or racialized) women\* are the first victims of precarious work (part-time, precarious contracts, split hours, jobs of little value) and discrimination in hiring, including in the public service, which structurally prevents them from having access to employment.

But that's not all ... Since the economic and financial crisis of 2008, attacks on public services and social security have accelerated. It is becoming increasingly clear that governments are at the service of the bosses, imposing a rescue of the richest 1% by the working class. Along with wage insecurity, women\* face austerity head-on: pensions, income support, unemployment benefits and social benefits, co-payments, unjustified time credits, maternity leave shortened in the event of sickness, nurseries, rest homes, transport, health care... everything is unravelled, cut, privatized and converted into a commodity to consume. Women\* are directly affected by all these measures, but they do not have the time to take care of themselves, they are forced to plug the breaches of a broken solidarity with a backhoe. They fall ill or become mentally overloaded. Their absences from work are now regarded as "absenteeism" that employers can legally sanction by dismissals without compensation. Where no space is left for illness, relaxation, recreation, breaks are chimeras that have a price.

Faced with the deterioration in working conditions, social security and public services, women\* are still present in struggles but systematically made invisible. We talk about workers, we forget female workers, with or without jobs,

with or without papers, sick or in good health. For some professions, the affront is even stronger, half of women\* employees work in the non-profit sector and 40% work in the service sector. When housekeepers, cleaners, early childhood educators, caregivers, babysitters, secretaries, nurses, teachers, midwives or cashiers strike, these are women\*'s strikes. In a context where women\* are systematically erased from history, this statement can only appear as an offense (or worse, a division of the working class) to those who deny us the right to self-determination. They refuse to understand that the working class cannot free themselves by relegating half of the people who are part of it to the background

## 2. Organizing and making women\* visible is a necessity!

Strikes by employees are means of struggle that emerged in the 19th century when the capitalist system was booming, and wage exploitation was becoming widespread. These strikes were often represented as involving groups of men, but women\*, often migrants and/or children, were also active in the mobilizations with their own demands. For example, the strikes of women\* workers in industrial production workshops in Germany in 1880 who protested against the sexual harassment of bosses, foremen and their colleagues. We can also talk about the "bread and roses" strike of women\* migrant workers in the textile industry in Lawrence, United States, in 1912 against the reduction of their wages.

While not entitled to union representation, more than 2,000 workers were on strike for more than two months until they won. They set up a strike committee, a strike fund, translations, day-care centres and community canteens. In addition to being exploited, women\* are specifically oppressed, so women\*'s strikes must be more creative than conventional strikes to fight on several levels. The Women\*'s Tax Resistance League was created in 1909 by British suffragettes advocating a reproduction strike (refusing to bear children), a domestic strike and a strike on civic duties such as paying taxes. Their main slogan was "no vote, no tax". In 1961, during the Cold War, the Women\*'s Peace Strike in the United States brought together more than 50,000 women\* in more than 60 cities against the Vietnam War and nuclear tests. In 1974, four years after the strike for women\*'s rights in the United States, the women\*'s liberation movement in France organized a strike of wage labour, domestic work, childcare and sexual tasks to raise awareness about patriarchal oppression. In recent years, we have heard a lot about the 1975 women\*'s strike in Iceland, where more than 90% of women\* workers went on a wage and home strike and came together for a day to demand equal wages for women\*.

In Belgium, the best-known women\*'s strike was that at FN Herstal, involving 3,000 women\* striking for more than 3 months to claim "equal pay for equal work", despite the union's attempts to suffocate the movement. A strike, perhaps less well-known, but just as important was that of the workers of the Bekaert-Cockerill company in 1982. To increase their profits, the bosses proposed either an increase to 36 hours for all workers, the dismissal of 13 people or a shift to part-time for women\* who were not heads of household. The shop stewards supported the last option, which women\* strongly opposed because it was out of the question to consider the casualization of women\* as a solution. Finally, 13 women\* who rejected the part-time solution were dismissed and replaced by 13 male workers hired on a higher wage.

History shows that men never rose spontaneously to combat inequality, sexism and violence against women\*. They must fight on all fronts and they are guilty if they dare to denounce the violence of colleagues or comrades. At the same time, women\* are raised and educated to care for others, to be smiling, to be attentive, to be fragile and dependent and to pay attention to our appearance. Gender stereotypes are real barriers to women\*'s liberation. For all these reasons, our self-organization in an autonomous movement without cisgender men is imperative, not as an end but as a means to build our power to act and carry our own demands without being swept away. and judged as "non-priority", "irrelevant" or "bourgeois". The women\*'s strikes are the political link between the need to impose a

balance of power in the workplace, but also in all areas of daily life.

Feminists of the 1970s used the slogan “the personal is the political” to show that the oppression and exploitation of women\* is exercised everywhere and all the time, at work, on the street and at home. In a context where we are increasingly isolated from each other, the mixed spaces chosen allow us to share our experiences, to re-establish links and to become aware of our collective strength. We do not rely on other social actors (state, bosses or even leaders of the trade union movement or male comrades) to defend us, as summarized by the slogan “don’t liberate me, I will take care of it!”. What we need are willing accomplices to fight our demands, not men who speak for us, not lesson givers.

### **3. International strikes against capitalism, this racist and hetero-patriarchal system**

Monday, October 3, 2016 was known as “black Monday” in Poland, where several thousand women\* went on strike and demonstrated in the streets of Warsaw against the restriction of the already limited right to abortion. On October 19, Argentine women\* followed suit in response to Lucia Perez's feminicide (a woman murdered because she is a woman). They stopped work for an hour all over the country and made the link between feminicide and economic, social, colonial and territorial violence. In January 2017, the Women\*'s March on Washington brought together thousands of women\* against the Trump presidency and for the rights of women\*, migrants and LGBTQI + people.

In the process, an international call for women\*'s strikes was launched at the initiative of the movement Ni Una Menos and the US Women\*'s Strike. On March 8, 2017, women\*'s strikes were held in more than fifty (!) countries around the world. In Spain, on March 8, 2018, more than 5 million (!) strikers beat the pavement in a gigantic movement. Women\* strike in domestic work, education, consumption and wage labour. They reject violence against women\*, evictions, racism and economic exploitation and want to put the right to live with dignity in the centre of concerns. This international feminist movement is re-politicizing the strike, it is the will for a radical change of system that is only possible through an international struggle. It revives the link with the historical origin of the International Day of Women\*'s Rights initiated in 1910 at the Second International Women\*'s Congress and with the massive strike of Russian women\* that kicked off the revolution on March 8, 1917.

In most cases, women\* are forced to take a day off to participate in strikes because trade union activity is weakened, rare or even prohibited in many countries. But this does not prevent them from having an impact on economic production. In addition, the strength of these strikes resides in their ability to support an autonomous movement of women\* who discuss political strategy and who radicalize in the street. This is even more necessary because it has become very difficult to get organized politically in the workplace precisely because it is more and more difficult to have a job and to have a long-term contract. Many women\*, notably among the *gilets jaunes*, show their desire to hit harder, “stop the machine” and not just gather on weekend days. But the radicalism and convergence of the mobilizations is far from being given, they are constructed and must be imposed by the construction of the movement and the collective debates within it.

It is fundamental to fight against a reformist, white and bourgeois feminism, dominant in the media and institutions, that fights sexism with quotas in the state and capitalist hierarchy, and the heads of millionaire companies like Proximus. It is also essential to build bridges and links between capitalist exploitation, racist oppression, sexist oppression, the oppression of trans and intersex people, the oppression of sick and invalid people, and ecological destruction.

These links are not made by adding demands one on top of the other but by their permanent connection. The

ultimate goal is not to bring together ecologists, anti-racists, feminists and so on but to make the workers' movement understand that it is anti-capitalist to fight radically against racism and sexism, that the feminist movement understands that it is feminist to radically fight capitalism and ableism, and so on. The victories of massive and self-organized struggles in one sector also weaken the dominant capitalist order, open gaps and reinforce the entire social movement and the confidence of the working class in its own forces.

The Black Lives Matter movement initiated by three women\* in the United States in 2013 against systemic racism and the assassination of black people (mostly men and trans people) has had an impact on the radicalization of the American feminist movement, which has in turn favoured the return of the strike as a political and economic weapon of workers throughout the country (recently again with flight attendants and teachers). The murders of the Honduran environmental activist Berta Caceres in 2016 and the Brazilian PSOL activist Marielle Franco show that women\* are decisive actors not only in feminist and LGBTQIA + movements but also environmentalist, peasant, anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements ... including at the cost of their lives. They are in our memories when we fight.

## 4. And in Belgium?

On March 8, 2019, Belgium joins the international movement with a first feminist national women\*'s strike. The demands relate to pensions as well as equal pay, free and high quality public services, socialization and sharing of domestic tasks, non-sexist education, the development of feminist self-defence, free unrestricted access to abortion, listening to women\* who have experienced violence, regularization of all undocumented people, dismantling of closed centres, ecological transition, stopping Belgium's direct or indirect participation in military interventions, the recognition of Belgian colonial history, the freedom to love who we want, to move, to create and to have fun as we feel it.

As in many European countries, Belgium is currently marked by the political power of the racist neoliberal right. The fall of the government was not the result of a massive social mobilization that was needed since its formation in 2014, but around the signing of the UN Pact on Migration. [2] The result was immediately felt with the rebirth of a street far-right and a rally of more than 5,000 of them in Brussels on December 16th 2018. We know very well that migrants and/or non-white, and/or Muslim or Jewish and/or women\* and/or trans and/or non-heterosexual people and/or trade unionists or radical left activists are directly targeted by the extreme right. Anti-fascist re-mobilization, particularly in Flanders, is essential before the federal and European elections on May 26.

At the same time, since January, the country has been shaken by the massive strikes (tens of thousands!) of high school students and students in higher education for climate. This incredible mobilization imposes the ecological issue with the slogan "no climate, no future". It is also a demonstration of the power of student strikes. Finally, several rallies and actions of *gilets jaunes* against the rise in fuel taxes and more widely against the cost of living have taken place in different parts of the country since November 16, 2018. At the beginning of the year, the unions finally woke up and a general strike will take place on February 13, 2019 to demand a real increase in wages.

The feminist women\*'s strike is part of the landscape of all these mobilizations. Its organization into committees, with mobilization groups and monthly general meetings, revives the autonomous feminist movement. This movement strengthens anti-capitalist forces because its demands are incompatible with a logic of economic growth and profit. In addition, the strike by women\* gives a new dimension to the strike, since it stops both productive and reproductive work, this work which is necessary for the workers to be "operational" on a daily basis to produce value for capitalism. Work stoppage, self-organization, the perspective of another society: the radical potential of this movement is obvious. It is giving a new impetus to a trade union movement currently in a strategic stalemate. The activity of many participants of Collectief 8 maars has already allowed several union federations to file a strike notice such as the CNE (hospitals, early childhood, cleaning, rest homes), the Centrale Générale de la FGVB (cleaning, service

vouchers, nursing homes) and the CGSP-Brussels (public services, education, public hospitals, transport, nurseries). The entire CSC (a Christian union, all sectors combined) will also observe the strike but will not give notice.

The general demands of the Collecti.e. f 8 maars, will not be realized in a day. That is why the main goal of this first women\*'s feminist strike is to allow us to come out of our isolation, denounce all the violence we suffer, ensure our self-defence and make visible all the work which we carry out on a daily basis and which goes well beyond paid work. This is the meaning of the slogan "if women\* stop, the world stops!" And women\* plan to stop.

## 5. How to organize for March 8?

Gauche anticapitaliste calls on all its members and supporters to participate in the actions of March 8! "In solidarity, each with their possibilities, experience, demands and desires, make March 8, 2019 an intense day of struggle and liberation!"

*PS:*

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[1] We talk about women\* because we are convinced of the need to make ourselves visible as such in the face of the heteropatriarchal system. But, at the same time, our identities go beyond the binary categories imposed on us and the multiplicity of our identities must be respected in the chosen political mix space. In order to recall this particular use of the word "women", we therefore add this asterisk.

[2] <https://www.ft.com/content/b864e2ee-fb49-11e8-aebf-99e208d3e521>.