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International Women's Day

What the Women's Strike Means

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Feminist, grassroots, and socialist organizations around the world have called for an International Women's Strike on March 8 in defense of reproductive rights and against violence, understood as economic, institutional, and interpersonal violence.

The strike will take place in at least forty countries – the first internationally coordinated day of protest on such a large scale in years: in terms of size and diversity of organizations and countries involved, it will be comparable to the international demonstrations against the imperialist attack on Iraq in 2003 and to the international protests coordinated under the banner of the World Social Forum and the global justice movement in the early 2000s.

While Occupy, the indignados, and Black Lives Matter did manage to have international echo and to trigger demonstrations, occupations, and protests in a number of country, there was little conscious international coordination among the various organizations and groups involved. The Arab revolutions were an extraordinary and historic event, but social and political organizations in other countries failed to give birth to a powerful internationally coordinated mobilization in their support.

If it succeeds, the International Women's Strike will mark a qualitative and quantitative leap in the long process of reconstructing an international social mobilization against neoliberalism and imperialism, to which the various movements of recent years, from Occupy to Gezi Park, from the indignados to Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter have given form. It will also signal the concrete possibility for a new, powerful, anticapitalist, and internationalist feminist movement.

Why Are We Calling It a Strike?

Many discussions about the strike, particularly in the United States, have centered on whether it is correct to call March 8 a "strike" at all, rather than a demonstration. This criticism misses the point. Women's strikes have always been more encompassing in their targets and aims than traditional walkouts over wages and working conditions.

In 1975, 90 percent of Iceland's women staged a strike in the workplace and refused to perform unpaid socially reproductive work for a day, in order to make Icelandic women's work and contribution to the society visible. They demanded equal wages with men and an end to sexual discrimination in the workplace.

In the fall of 2016, Polish activists adopted the strategy and message of the 1975 Iceland women's strike and organized a massive women's strike to stop a bill in parliament that would have banned abortion. Argentinian activists did the same last October to protest male violence against women.

These events – which spurred the idea for a larger strike on Women's Day – demonstrate how a women's strike is different from a general strike. A women's strike springs from political and theoretical reflection on the concrete forms of women's labor in capitalist societies.

In capitalism women's work in the formal labor market is only a part of the work they perform; women are also the primary suppliers of reproductive labor – unpaid labor that is equally important to reproducing society and capitalist social relations. A women's strike is designed to make this unpaid work visible and to emphasize that social

reproduction is also a site of struggle.

Moreover, because of the sexual division of labor in the formal labor market, a vast number of women hold precarious jobs, don't have labor rights, are unemployed, or are undocumented workers.

Women working in the formal and informal labor market and in the unpaid social reproductive sphere are all workers. This consideration must be central to any discussion about the reconstruction of a working-class movement not only in the United States, but also globally.

Emphasizing the unity between the workplace and the home is key, and a central organizing principle for the March 8 strike. A politics that takes women's work seriously must include not only strikes in the workplace but also strikes from unpaid social reproductive work, part-time strikes, calls for reduced work time, and other forms of protest that recognize the gendered nature of social relations.

"Strike" has become the umbrella term under which these various forms of action are included because it is the term that best emphasizes the centrality of women's labor and their self-identification as workers, whatever form their work takes.

Reclaiming the Right to Strike

The United States has perhaps the worst labor laws among liberal democracies. General strikes and political strikes are forbidden, strikes are tied to narrow economic demands addressed to employers, and contracts often have explicit no-strike clauses, the violation of which can cause the worker to lose their job and/or the union organizing the strike to receive hefty fines. Additionally, several states, such as New York, have laws that explicitly forbid public employees from striking.

The discussion about how to reverse this situation and empower workers has been the main strategic concern of the US left over the past few decades. Yet one of the dangers in this discussion is that of reducing class struggle to economic struggle alone, and of conflating capitalist social relations with the formal economy in a narrow sense.

A transformation of labor relations in the United States requires not simply an activation of the working class on the basis of economic demands in the workplace, but its politicization and radicalization — the capacity to wage a political struggle addressing the totality of relations of power, institutions, and forms of exploitation in place.

This cannot be achieved by improving and expanding rank-and-file organizing in the workplace alone; one of the central problems radical labor organizing faces is its political and social isolation and invisibility. Laying the groundwork for the revitalization of working-class power will require operating on different levels — creating large social coalitions acting inside and outside workplaces and establishing bonds of solidarity and trust among labor, antiracist, feminist, student, and anti-imperialist organizers and activists. It also means harnessing social imagination through creative, intellectual and theoretical interventions and experimentation with new practices and languages.

Instead of a narrow focus on workplace struggles, we need to connect movements based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality together with labor organizing and environmental activism. Only by creating this collective totality will we be able to address the complexity of issues and demands put forward by these various forms of mobilization.

What the Women's Strike Means

This is the path that the International Women's Strike is pursuing, with its expansive platform and inclusiveness.

March 8 will not be a general strike. But it will be an important step toward the re-legitimation of the right to strike against the degradations of capitalism felt in all spheres of life by all people.

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