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USA/ Women

Women at the sharp end

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Women make up the majority of teachers, municipal and state government workers - an interview with some of those involved in organising an International Womens Day March in Madison, Wisconsin where women are on the sharp end of Walker's union busting attacks.

How did the idea of helping plan an International Women's Day (IWD) march come about?

Kate: We had a Solidarity meeting on Sunday March 6. I brought the idea to hold a rally on Tuesday, International Women's Day. Tessa, Rebecca, Colin, and myself got together decided to throw something together and make something happen. This IWD was particularly special because it was the 100th anniversary of its first celebration. This year is also the 100-year anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. I thought it was very important to make the connection between IWD and what is happening in Wisconsin right now.

In Wisconsin, women make up the majority of teachers, municipal and state government workers. Women dominate the public sector in Wisconsin. Gov. Walker's bill is an attack on women because the bill itself, not just the a few aspects of it, attacks so many social programs. Every disadvantaged community is going to be devastated. This struggle is more than just unions trying to be paid a half-decent wage. It is a broader issue than that because they are trying to give money to the rich and the corporations on the backs of everyone else.

So I saw lots of connections between the current battle and IWD. IWD is supposed to be a day that we recognize women's struggle in terms of rights and gains. I can only draw one correlation: this whole thing is an attack on women. Clara Zetkin, the founder of the day, said that it is not about women and men; it is about women's equality and especially with the proletarian movement, women and men struggling together. When I say women, I mean every woman, not just white women. It's really important for me to emphasize this.

How did the march and rally unfold?

Kate: The whole rally was promoted through word-of mouth. We had a lineup of speakers and spoken word artists. Our march started out with around 150 people, we picked up another 150 people on the route, and when we reached the Capitol, there was another 300-400 people waiting at the Capitol. There was that wonderful moment when the two groups merged together at the Capitol. The march itself was very spirited and people were very happy to be there.

We didn't have a permit for anything, because what went into effect on Tuesday was you have to now give 72 hour notice if you hold any rally or anything. We started the march at a square and when reached the first street the cops were nervous, but then we took over the street, where buses had to wait for us. Traffic had to stop for us for five to six blocks. We had several bus drivers put their fists up, and car passengers put their fists up too. This was during rush-hour traffic, around 5:30pm, which is quite amazing.

At the Capitol, we set up our sound system. We brought red carnations and purple daises; red carnations signify international women's day, especially for radical communities. The LGBTQ movement, decades ago, initially had some problems with the mainstream women's movement, so they started carrying purple flowers during IWD to signify queer people and people who reject gender binaries. There were flowers scattered throughout the march.

There were three firefighters in the crowd, two men, one woman. They asked us, "Can we play a song?" They were

really respectful about it. I said, “sure, yeah”, so they played “God Bless America”. Up at the front, Tessa was invited to hold a rainbow flag between two firefighters. The solidarity that was there was important and how respectful they were. I thought it was very moving.

One of the Democratic Assembly members that people have been having problems with, Brett Hulseby, showed up and we didn't let him speak to the crowd. At the end of the rally, we put our carnations on the Forward statue, which is a bronze stature showing a woman pointing forward by the capitol.

We tried to get a diverse crowd with the speakers. I thought that we did an okay job with the time that we had. We had one of my high school teachers, who radicalized me, give an amazing speech on the history of women's struggle in the U.S., especially socialist women labor activists. We had a spoken word artist that slammed Gov. Scott Walker. We had an Israeli-American woman, who served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and has since become radicalized give an anti-imperialist perspective on this whole thing. We asked students from Student Labor Action Coalition (SLAC) to speak. Everyone was really awesome.

What could have been done better and where do you think this rally leads from here?

Kate: I think we could have done better if we had more time. We all worked so hard in a 50-hour period to make it happen. We also produced literature that we passed out at the rally, but made it relevant to the entire struggle. Women are most affected by Gov. Walker's bill. These issues do not go away because it is no longer IWD. People are already thinking about this stuff in Madison without our help. For instance, on the morning of the rally, I was at work and a friend of mine was telling me that teachers in Madison are already working together on a write-up on how this is an attack on women. The level of discussion these last three weeks has been amazing.

I'm happy to provide this flyer and maybe this rally inspired people, but I think that many people were already there. People felt that we were in a stagnation period and were becoming a little pessimistic, so the rally helped get people's spirits up and got them energized. I know that the rally energized me. Tessa, Rebecca, Nicole, and myself all sang “Solidarity Forever”, but with altered lyrics that emphasize the struggles of women, at the rally too.

From Against the Current