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Women

Women lead the way

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Chanting and cheering, tens, hundreds and thousands of women demonstrated in 159 countries during the second and third weeks of October. The World March of Women Against Poverty and Violence was a huge success - although ignored by the media of almost all countries.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/wmowwash.jpg>]

Washington - 15 October 2000

On October 15, in Washington, 20,000 people marched, including some 2000 women and men from countries other than the United States. In New York, about 10,000 women and men from many nations rallied at the United Nations and then marched to Union Square. They joined the March and represented women all over the planet taking part in the World March of Women. Close to 100 countries were represented. Notable among the delegations were the large European contingent, energised by the success of the March of European Women, held earlier in Brussels on October 14 which brought together almost 35,000 women. There were also 250 women from Mexico, who arrived in a motorcade that set out from Chiapas. Some 50 Japanese women also attended, as well as a large number of Native women and vibrant groups of women from Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

These women represent both a continuation of the wave of women's liberation movements from the 1970s and new generations of young women fighting against the poverty and violence created by the neo-liberal globalisation. They are part of the mobilisations against neo-liberal globalisation in Seattle, Washington, Melbourne and Prague - and now focused on the specific impact on women. There are two major new features of between this Women's March 2000 against Poverty and Violence: those joining agreed to a radical anti-neo-liberal globalisation and anti-patriarchy platform, and, almost all were part of a four year organising process that generated the simultaneous actions in each country as well as the march in New York.

Focusing on the 'female face of poverty', the platform of the Women's March 2000 calls for the abolition of the third world debt as well as rejection of the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment programmes. While noting the link between poverty and violence against women, the platform also notes that many rich countries maintain patriarchal laws and policies that treat women as 'less than human' and thus perpetuate and reinforce the violence that women suffer. The World March of Women demanded from the UN and its member States concrete measures to put an end to poverty and the different forms of violence against women. It demanded genuine respect for the rights of all women regardless of their origin, their sexual orientation or their social or cultural affiliation.

And this raises a weakness of the Women's March 2000. While the platform is quite radical, the strategy is one of lobbying governments and the various institutions of national and international governments. This flows from the origin of the call for the World March of Women by the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ) after the UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. Like other NGOs (non-governmental organisations), the FFQ had taken part in the parallel conference of NGOs same time but on the outskirts of Beijing. With the focus on lobbying governments but deciding, as a result of the surprise success and impact of the 1995 Bread and Roses March of Women in Québec, that governments paid more attention to public actions than just private lobbying, the FFQ launched the appeal for a World March of Women in 2000. With the original contacts being those women-based NGOs that had been at Beijing, the lobbying strategy was maintained. Thus the Women's March calls upon the very institutions - the IMF, World Bank, and national governments that are the source of the problem - to reform themselves and to adopt and apply the human rights legislation to protect women from violence and to ensure swift action against poverty and its effects on women and children.

Respecting national differences and seeking to operate in a democratic way, the FFQ was able to get the funding for

a conference in Montréal, Canada, in 1998 to develop and adopt the platform. The focus was on developing national unitary structures for the March in each country and encouraging the development of national demands and actions as well as international ones. While the conference was exciting, conflict arose over the style of decision making (consensus versus vote-taking) and the inclusion of lesbian rights in the international platform when this would preclude the involvement of many women's organisations from non-American or non-European areas of the world. This concern with the non-representativeness and the sometimes bureaucratic functioning continued throughout the preparations for the World March.

But the very impact of ongoing neo-liberal globalisation lead to a broad response:

– from women in the 'first world' who had seen their gains of the 1970s and 1980s eroded as well as the cutbacks in social services causing both job loss and increased work load;

– from women in the 'third world' who saw the devastation of the IMF and WB's structural adjustment on educational and social services leading to virtually no public health care services with a consequent increase in maternal and infant death rates and a return of previously controlled illnesses such as TB and cholera;

– from women in war-torn areas who were both victims of violence by enemy soldiers and were further victimised as refugees in camps in nearby areas. At the Women's March in New York, six women from countries in conflict (Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan, Palestine, Rwanda and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) talked with emotion and conviction of the effects of these conflicts, particularly on the lives of women and children. They denounced the industry of death that travels from country to country in the form of arms and other kinds of trafficking.

In all women from 159 different countries organised and acted within the framework of the World March of Women 1000 Against Poverty and Violence. Roughly five million signatures were collected from all over the planet in support of its two demands - to eliminate poverty and violence against women - and were presented to the UN. The actions in each country sought specific changes - whether to the minimum wage laws or to increased funding for women's centres or for education for girls, etc. Few, if any, concrete changes can be seen as a result of these actions. But women have recognised the reality of their ability to collectively organise and the strength of this collective solidarity.

The decision has already been made to continue the organisational network set up for the Women's March and to begin discussing both a balance sheet and the prospects for future actions. Socialist-feminist organisations, including our sections, need to be part of these discussions and organisations, in order to push the platform to develop a more explicitly anti-capitalist analysis, including going beyond lobbying and having a misplaced faith in the national and international institutions to either implement current human rights legislation or to reform themselves into progressive structures. The organising also needs to expand to include more grass-roots women's organisations in all countries which will raise again the question of the need for truly representative decision making structures.

But with the recommitment of feminists from the 1970s and 1980s and the involvement of young women of the 'Seattle generation' now taking place, there are grounds for hope. The younger generation of women are often spontaneously anti-capitalist because of their opposition to neo-liberal globalisation and, being products of the period after the gains by the women's movement, are organically anti-patriarchal. Consequently, the resurgence of a women's liberation movement is back on the agenda. Our slogan of the 1970s remains to be realised: "No socialist revolution without women's liberation and no women's liberation without socialist revolution".