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Feminism

Some notes on inflation, famine and feminism

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This text is the result of a militant need. The need to rearm feminist analysis and programme after the last period of capitalist crisis. It forces us to think about the ravages of the pandemic, the inflationary crisis, the political measures applied and a probable recession on the horizon. It forces us to think about all of this from a feminist perspective including the contributions of the theory of social reproduction and Marxism, along with lessons learned from the latest feminist strikes, because we are convinced that the forms of discrimination in the economic and social field are being reproduced and sharpened. Today, unfortunately, there are not many insights in this field. For this reason, this text does not seek to be more than a few notes in the hope that other texts will appear that surpass it.

We start with the evidence: the conditions which ensure social reproduction have become substantially more expensive with the inflationary crisis. The price of food, energy (water, gas, electricity), basic hygiene and sanitary products, as well as housing (although that corresponds to another speculative dynamic) have skyrocketed. Each and every day, accessing essential products that capitalism demands to ensure social reproduction becomes more and more difficult. Women and minorities on whom the provision of care is imposed see that our possibilities of ensuring this care are impoverished. The inflationary crisis is overlapped with the previous crisis and, in particular, with the impoverishment of public services. Health, education, social services and other institutional forms which soak up part of social reproduction are being dragged down by serious problems. This unsustainable situation in the public arena has a direct impact on greater burdens for families; it also enables the proliferation of a growing market in privatised care with brutal exploitative conditions.

In summary, we determine that the inflationary crisis is a fundamental facet of the reproductive crisis. Inflation fuels the contradiction between, on the one hand, the capitalist interests of hoarding and maximum profit – the true objective of price inflation, as Intermón Oxfam has pointed out [\[1\]](#) – and, on the other hand, the austerity imposed to reproduce the workforce and the people who embody it.

However, it would not be fair to end at this point. If the objective is to point out some insights that allow us to rearm a feminist programme, it is required that we address political and trade-union attempts to contain the reproductive crisis. These efforts have focused on the wages path, and both the different policies around the minimum wage, as well as the union initiative around Consumer Price Index changes, deserve reflection.

In the last year and a half we have witnessed a series of union conflicts – including important strikes – that had as their objective updating the CPI on wages to be as advantageous as possible. While inflation caused the CPI to rise by an annual average of 8.4%, the increases by agreement have not increased by more than 2.8% on average for 2022. However, these increases have been uneven: in Catalonia, 70% of people with the lowest salary increases – less than 3 points – were women. [\[2\]](#) The union fight for increases is a necessary one, however tackling the struggle agreement-by-agreement reproduces a gender gap that we cannot ignore; this should provoke a tactical and programmatic reflection for a feminist trade unionism. In addition, we must listen to the protagonists of the latest wave of union struggles in feminised sectors and denounce the additional difficulties that women workers in these sectors suffer in labour negotiations. Domestic workers in Bizkaia, have drawn attention to employers using humiliating language, treating them like children and ignoring their demands, whilst public administrations, instead of mediating as they do in other sectors such as metal, imposing very high minimum services, do not carry out the necessary inspections and do not fulfill their responsibilities.

In addition, it should be noted that the bulk of people who work outside of collective agreements and who are therefore left out of data are also mostly women, sexual minorities and people of migrant origin. As a result of this,

the policy of increasing the minimum wage would have had an impact on part of these sectors. However, the non-repeal of the labour reforms of the [right-wing] Partido Popular (People's Party) and the [ruling] Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) and the insufficient modifications made by the current government, without forgetting the immigration law that de facto excludes hundreds of thousands of people, means that a gender gap in purchasing power continues to be reproduced.

The dynamic of increasing private income without short-circuiting the possibilities of price escalation is one of bread for today, hunger for tomorrow. A wages policy that is not accompanied by a fight against the capitalist hoarding typical of inflation, is destined for a progressive devaluation of wages. An increase in salaries today does not prevent agri-food companies, landlords or the energy oligopoly from raising prices tomorrow. In summary, wages and their increases are a key vector in reproduction, however, a policy that does not address all aspects of reproduction is doomed to devalue its own wages policy.

To address all aspects of reproduction, we cannot think of the inflationary crisis in isolation; it is essential to insert it into the ravages of the pandemic and more than a decade of cuts in public services. The structural adjustment that has been imposed in the health and education fields, in social services and other institutional resources has had a brutal impact on domestic burdens and has opened the door to the proliferation of a private care market, either through the commodification of care in homes or through the advance of privatisation in public services.

Policies of privatisation and public-private partnerships, which are the norm for the majority of the autonomous governments, have been a mechanism for transferring public money to private companies so that they can build a large-scale business related to social reproduction: for example, the outsourcing of health services to private care centers, laboratories or directly to private management companies. The same happens with homes and care for the elderly: social and community services are transferred to lucrative entities of the private sector, the logic of the market is implemented in public education and there is a proliferation of private pension systems.

In addition, despite the fact that the pandemic highlighted the enormous risks generated by the nonexistence of strong health and care services, the post-pandemic recovery funds, channeled through the Next Generation [\[3\]](#) only allocate €982 million for health and €808 for the Economy Social and Care (out of a total of €32,293 million). Minimal funds (compared to those allocated to electric vehicles, for example) that – as reported by several organisations – are not designed to increase staff or improve the quality of services, but instead focus on digitisation as a new niche business for public-private partnerships.

The great adjustment in the terrain of the public realm is not something exogenous to gender or class. The great adjustment in the public realm is an adjustment towards the conditions of reproduction of the working class; we are the ones who really use and need publicly accessible infrastructure. But also, the more the public terrain recedes, the more the private-domestic burdens advance. If waiting lists for public health take forever, the provision of domestic-private care also takes forever. If pensions are pyrrhic and threaten to turn into a marketable good, the entire family economy is committed to ensuring the reproduction of our elderly people. In general, we see a series of communicating vessels where there is a transfer of workloads derived from social reproduction. A transfer to those who are forced to provide care in the domestic framework of the family; if the situation does not also force us into precarious work within the private care market.

In short, the ravages of the pandemic and the inflationary crisis deepen a profound crisis of social reproduction that is being settled against the working class in general and women, migrants and minorities in particular. Is this situation capable of being politicised? How can we ripen political awareness from this untenable situation? Inflationary crises have historically been moments of explosions and social revolts. In February 1917, the women of Russia, fed up with inflation and high prices, lack of bread and increases in the cost of the meat made social peace unsustainable and they exploded as the spark that would start the February Revolution. [\[4\]](#)

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In Barcelona a year later, high inflation rates made coal more expensive in a particularly cold winter. The women of the coal queues broke out and looted the warehouses, called the workers to strike and staged riots for two weeks. [5]

The same thing happened in Málaga that year with the labouring women, las Faeneras, who also faced with price rises of bread, coal, rent, fish along with the misery of the war, would explode in the city. On the other side of the Atlantic, on New York's Lower East Side, a few years earlier, in 1902 working-class Jewish women organized boycotts against the meat monopoly in the face of price inflation, rioted, organized pickets, coordinated with labour unions and planned cooperatives. Their struggles would inspire the rent strikes of 1907-1908. In Washington, Boston, Philadelphia and Brooklyn the revolts continued throughout the following decade. [6]

But we do not need to go that far back in time: in the crisis of 2008, it was women who led and carried out most of the home occupations in the face of mortgage evictions. It was women who filled the assemblies of the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform of those Affected by Mortgages) and those of the Tenants Unions. Riots, boycotts and looting in the face of famines are part of the genealogy of the labour movement and of the feminism that we must put at the service of inspiring struggles against present-day famines. This text began by acknowledging the militant need to rearm a feminist programme in the face of a new political phase, to reorient ourselves in the face of the development of the capitalist crisis and its acute reproductive crisis. May these notes serve to feed this incessant task.

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Translated by David Fagan from [poder popular](#) for International Viewpoint.

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[1] Intermón Oxfam. [La ley del más rico \(16/01/2023\)](#), [summary](#) in English.

[2] Ubieta, Gabriel. "El 70% de los trabajadores con menores subidas salariales son mujeres". *El Periódico*, 16/01/2023.

[3] Also known as the European Union Recovery Instrument, Next Generation is a European Union (EU) economic recovery package for EU member states to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

[4] Salas, Miguel. "Febrero de 1917: Las mujeres inician la revolución". Sin Permiso, 26/02/2017. Disponible en: <https://www.sinpermiso.info/textos/febrero-1917-las-mujeres-inician-la-revolucion>

[5] Facet, Laia. "[Cien años de la huelga de mujeres de Barcelona](#)". Poder Popular, 26/04/2018.

[6] Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelma. "Without Reserves", in Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Theory of Social Reproduction* (2017). London, Pluto Press.