

Price: R2.50



1994

WORKERS' WORLD

A MAGAZINE OF
INTERNATIONAL
LABOUR AND
POLITICS



Demanding our rights!

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WOMEN WORKERS' STRUGGLES

- ★ Women workers and the transition
- ★ The economy and women workers
- ★ Organising women workers

WORKERS' WORLD is a publication of the International Labour Resource and Information Group (Ilrig). We are a research and service organisation based at the University of Cape Town. We provide research, information and education workshops on international labour and political issues to the progressive trade union and community organisations.

We are not a political organisation. But we are guided by the needs, aspirations and struggles of the oppressed and exploited people across the world. As a collective we support the struggle for socialism and international working class unity and solidarity. This is what motivates us to bring to South African workers the lessons and experiences of struggle of their comrades around the world. We try to do this in a way which will help workers and their allies in SA to build their struggle and their organisations.

WORKERS' WORLD is one small part of this work. It is a regular magazine which will bring to you the stories and analyses of struggles in other countries.

Although Ilrig edits each edition collectively, our articles will often reflect different progressive political points of view. We do not think that having different progressive points of view is a problem. We believe that this will help to build open and democratic debate in the progressive movement. As part of this, we encourage comrades who feel they want to write something about international issues to send us letters or articles. WORKERS' WORLD does not belong to Ilrig alone. We hope that our readers will feel that it belongs to them too and that they will help to build it into a strong and democratic progressive journal.

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Printed by UCT Printing, Observatory
ISSN 1015-7077

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MESSAGE TO READERS

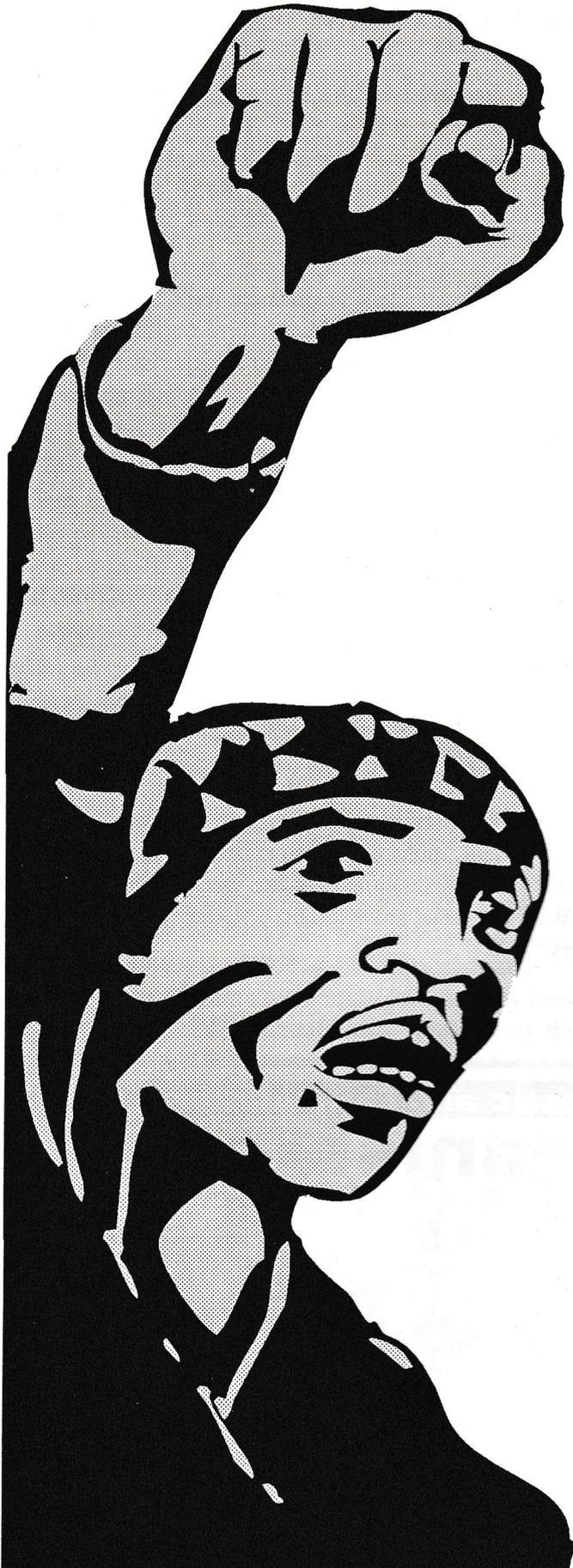
A new government has been elected! The majority of people voted for an ANC government. Hundreds of thousands of women, who form 52% of the electorate, voted for this government. Women and particularly women workers voted for a better life. Through their vote they are saying 'we want women's oppression and exploitation to end - in public as well as in our homes'.

In this special edition of WORKERS' WORLD, we focus on some of the issues facing women workers. We look at how the policies of the new government and the Interim Constitution will affect women workers. We look at the living and working conditions of women workers nationally and internationally. We also look at examples of how women workers organise themselves to fight against these conditions.

We show that women's oppression and exploitation is central to the working-class struggle against world capitalism.

This publication is not just to provide information about women workers, but also aims to help organisations run education programmes. In some sections we make suggestions as to how the information can be used in workshops and education seminars.

This publication has been produced with the support of SCIAF, a solidarity organisation based in Scotland. ILRIG thanks them for making this special edition of WORKERS' WORLD possible.





Women workers' hopes

Women, in particular women workers, all over South Africa have hopes and aspirations which they want the new elected government to meet. Just before the elections, ILRIG spoke to Gertrude, a domestic worker from Cape Town about her expectations of the new government. She also speaks about her children and the new labour law for domestic workers. (This new law gives domestic and farm workers certain basic conditions of employment, but does not stipulate a minimum wage.)

● *The future...*

'We are hoping to be recognised as workers after the elections. We are hoping to find houses for ourselves. We will have a way of speaking to the government if we have a people's government.'

● *The new law...*

'I am not happy about the new law. We had so many demands. We still don't know how much we will be paid. The hours will still be long. I start at 9 o'clock in the morning and finish at 2 o'clock the next morning. There are people that still get R150 a month. The government said we must wait for another year for a basic minimum wage act.'

● *Family life...*

'I have been in Cape Town since 1990. I have three children that stay in the Eastern Cape with my mother. The oldest is 18 and the youngest is 11 years. They come and visit me during holidays. I get to visit them only once a year.'

● *The new government...*

'We are looking forward to the new government. We're not sure if we as domestic workers will find anything different from the other government... This government is for the people. That gives us hope. At least we will be able to speak to this government. To the last government we couldn't say a word. It is going to be a challenge to us workers to open our mouths.'

The majority of women work as domestic workers and farmworkers. Ninety-five percent of all domestic workers are women. Domestic workers and farmworkers are the lowest paid, they work the longest hours and enjoy very few work benefits. Despite demands and calls from the labour movement, there is still no national minimum wage for domestic and farmworkers. Some of these workers get as little a R150 a month. Will the new government implement laws which benefit all workers? ★

Many of the demands made by workers under apartheid still need to be answered. Domestic workers and farmworkers also need a new South Africa!

Domestic and Farmworkers

Organise or STARVE

“ The boers took our land and broke our families up. They forced us to work for them. Now, after 100's of years, we still have no legal rights. We still earn starvation wages. We get no rest, no peace. We grow their food and we look after their children. But we are hungry and our children, who we never see, are dying. We cannot go on like this. We demand at least the same rights as other workers. ”

Farm and domestic workers must be covered by the Labour Relations Act and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act now!

A Government of National Unity has been formed. The Government of National Unity (the cabinet) will govern the country for the next five years, and consist of the ANC, the NP and the IFP. Other parties which are also part of parliament, but not in the cabinet are the Democratic Party, the Freedom Front, the Pan African Congress and the African Christian Democratic Party.

We must also remember that we have elected regional governments in each of the nine regions. These regional governments will govern the affairs of the regions.

For the next two years, the national government will run the country according to the laws written in the Interim Constitution. Who drew up the Interim Constitution? The group of political parties which were part of the negotiations at Kempton Park drew up this constitution. But this group was not elected by the people of South Africa. Therefore the Interim Constitution cannot be the final constitution.

Many of us know that for a long time we demanded a democratically elected constituent assembly. We said that this is the only body which can draw up the constitution. The 400 persons who are now in parliament, will also be the representatives to the constituent assembly. They will draw up the final constitution.

The new government has many tasks:

- it must govern the country for the next five years
- it must draw up the final constitution in the next two years
- it must implement the Reconstruction and Development Programme. The way in which the government carries out these tasks will affect the daily lives of the people, especially working-class people and in particular working-class women.

Unlike in the past, this new government has been elected by the majority. Many people that are sitting in parliament are from our own organisations such as the ANC, Cosatu, SACP and SANCO. We must ensure that our representatives know our demands. And that they remain accountable to the people who elected them. They must look at the Interim Constitution and fight to change it, so that the laws of the country will benefit the working class. They must also ensure that the Government of National Unity implements the Reconstruction and Development Programme in a way that benefits the majority.

For the first time in South Africa, we see many women in parliament. Out of the 400 Members of Parliament, 98 are women. While this is a positive development, we need to look beyond numbers and at what the parties are saying about women and gender issues.

Working-class women – their problems and demands

The majority of women in this country – women workers in the factories, on the farms and in the homes have not only suffered from exploitation by the bosses and from oppression by the apartheid laws of the state. They also face oppression as women in society and from their husbands at home. In the rural areas where customary laws and traditions are implemented this oppression is felt more.

Women workers and the new democratic government

A new democratic government has been elected. The African National Congress (ANC) won an overwhelming victory. It got 62 percent of the vote (not the 66 percent needed to write its own constitution), and won in seven of the nine regions. For the majority of the population the outcome of the elections was a major victory. Now for the first time people have elected their government – a government which says that it will listen to the needs of the people. It is estimated that 52 percent of the people that voted were women. Will the government listen to the women?



● *The double burden*

Women work in the factories and in the fields, and then return home to work for their families. This unpaid work is even harder for the majority of women who do not have water, electricity, a house, transport and childcare facilities. The double burden of working for a boss and at home prevents the majority of women from participating in activities outside the home. How will the new government address these issues? What does the new government say about women's oppression not only in public places but also at home? Will the new government encourage the sharing of housework? How will the work of women at home be recognised?

● *Violence against women*

Thousands of women are abused by men every day. At home, at work and in the community women suffer violence and sexual harassment. The legal system in this country does not protect women against these abuses. How will the new government promote the elimination of violence against women? Does the Interim Constitution provide protection for women against this violence at home and in society?

● *Childcare*

For working mothers, proper care for their children when they are at work is very important. But most women cannot afford childcare facilities such as creches and day-care centres. How will the government in its programme of reconstruction address this problem?

● *Maternity and paternity benefits*

Pregnant women have very little job security at present. The law states that pregnant women don't have to work for four weeks before the birth and eight weeks after. But they are not guaranteed a job when they come back. How can these maternity benefits be improved? What about paternity benefits, so that fathers are also given the responsibility of child-care?

● *Access to land*

The redistribution and re-allocation of land will be one of the key issues facing the new government. In the rural areas women do most of the work on the land but do not have the right to own land. Also many of them do not have access to money to buy the seeds and implements to work the land, and to structures or committees where these things are discussed and decided.

● *Customary laws and traditions*

Under these laws, women are treated as children. They have no say in the home. They also cannot sell anything without their husband's permission. Polygamy (a man having more than one wife) is a big problem. And often the husband does not have the resources to support more than one wife. Married women under customary law have very few rights. Many of the women living in the rural areas have husbands who are migrant workers. Their husbands might desert them for a wife in the city leaving them as sole breadwinners. How will the government address the issue of customs and traditions?



● **Equal pay**

Women in full time jobs still earn less than men. Recently, the old apartheid government drafted a bill on equal pay for equal work. This bill has not been passed. Will the new government pass such a bill? How will it monitor the bosses implementing this law? What will the government do to eliminate the wage gap between men and women?

● **A fair tax system**

Income tax is another area where women experience discrimination. Married women pay higher taxes than married men. Also VAT on food, children's clothes and books affect working-class women.

● **Health**

For many working-class women, proper health care is not available or too expensive. It is only those who belong to medical aid schemes who have access to the best health care. This excludes the majority of the population.

Every year thousands of women go for dangerous back-street abortions. Again it is only the rich that have the resources and power to have access to legal abortions. Will the new government give women the right to choose to continue their pregnancy or not? Will the new health system be affordable for working-class women? Will it also address the particular needs of working-class women?

These are some of the main problems which working-class women face today. When looking at the Reconstruction and Development Programme and the Interim Constitution we need to see how they will begin to eliminate these problems.

The Interim Constitution

What is a Constitution? A Constitution lays out the legal rights of people, the powers of the government, the way it functions and the way in which it is chosen. Women workers know that neither the vote nor a Constitution can bring freedom and equality to them. It is through the struggles of women together with the rest of the working class that change will take place. But good laws can make conditions easier for the struggle against all discrimination to succeed. What does the Interim Constitution say about women worker issues?

● **Equality before the law**

Chapter 3 Section 8 on equality says that everyone, men and women, are equal before the law. It is a crime to discriminate against a woman. Although people are allowed to practise their customs or religious beliefs, the law on equality is above these other laws. But there are also weaknesses in this law:

The constitution does not say clearly that women are equal in the home as well as in public. In most homes, men see themselves as superior to their wives, and male children are given more privileges than female children. That is why the ANC says in its working document on the Bill of Rights that 'Men and women shall enjoy equal rights in all areas of public and private life, including employment, education and within the family.'

'Men and women shall enjoy equal rights in all areas of public and private life, including employment, education and within the family.'



The Constitution also does not say how the government will implement plans to remove those practices which create conditions for women to be treated unequally. It does not say how the division that makes women only do certain work (sexual division of labour) will be destroyed.

It also does not say what special plans and programmes for women will be implemented to speed up the process of creating equality between men and women.

● *The rights of workers*

Chapter 3 Section 27 of the Constitution gives workers the right to form and join trade unions. Women workers like all other workers have the right to strike. But this right to strike is only over collective bargaining issues. The right to strike over political and social issues is not guaranteed. This section also gives bosses rights. It states that bosses have the right to form and join their own organisations and also allows them to lock-out striking workers. Allowing bosses to use the lock-out weakens workers' right to strike.

● *Commission on gender equality*

Chapter 8 Section 119 and 120 states that a Commission on Gender Equality must be established. The function of the Commission is to promote gender equality and to advise and make recommendations to Parliament or any other law-making body on laws that affect gender equality and the status of women.

Women, workers organisations and other progressive organisations must see how this Commission can be used to push for better conditions for women and women workers. The first important task will be to ensure that those appointed to this commission know the demands of women workers. Other issues will be the work of the commission and how it will link up with organisations that represent women, workers and women workers.

Some women and other organisations have called for the setting up of a National Women's Ministry. Presently there is no Minister of Women or Gender Affairs in the national cabinet. It is only the PWV provincial parliament that has opened up a women's ministry. Maybe other provinces will do the same.

● *Other weaknesses*

A section on gender rights and affirmative action is absent in the Constitution. These sections are contained in the ANC's Constitutional Guidelines and Bill of Rights. They go much further in addressing the problem of women's oppression.

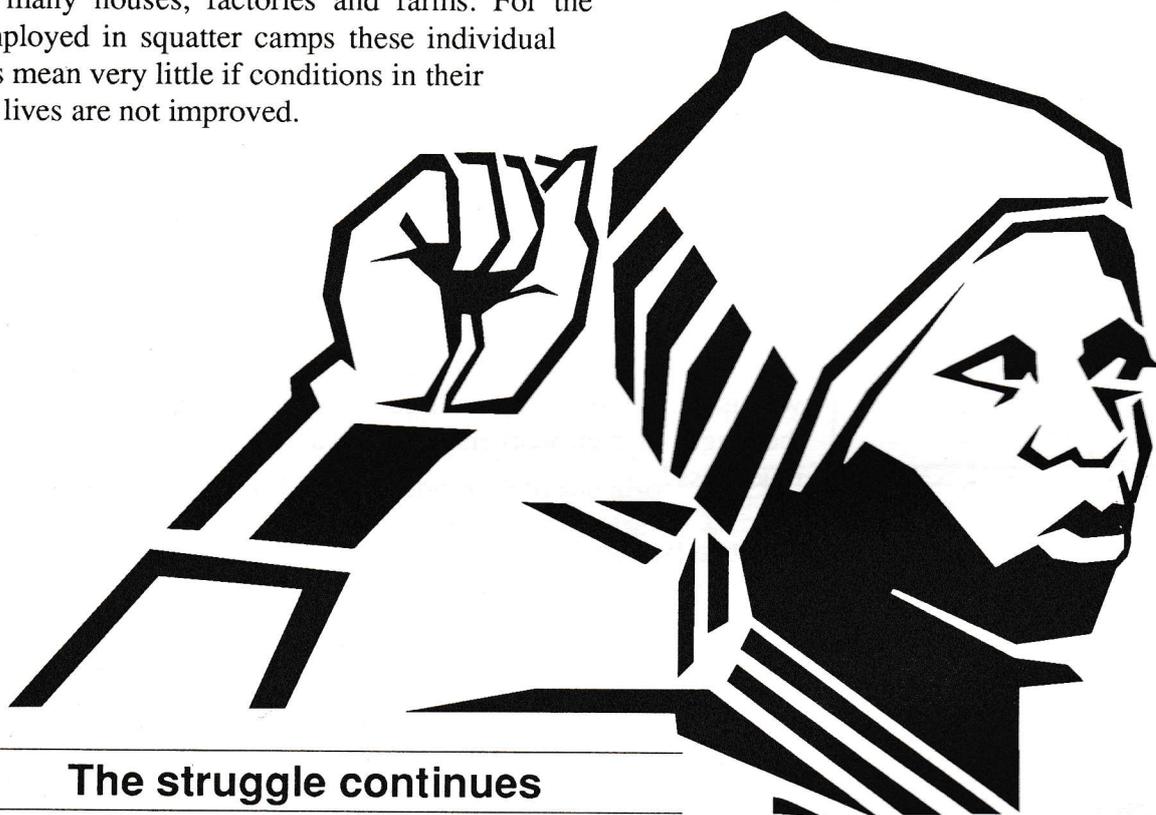
The Constitution also says that it is the courts and the judges that must decide if these laws are implemented correctly. But we know that the courts are controlled by white middle class men. Also working-class women do not have the money or resources to take others to court if they are discriminated against.

Besides the Constitution stating that men and women are equal before the law, the Constitution also allows communities to practice customary laws and traditions. On the one hand this is positive, since now the marriage of women under customary law is recognised. But on the other hand many customs, traditions and religions discriminate

against women. The Constitution does not state clearly how women in these communities will be properly protected against discrimination. So some women will be equal before the law while others will not.

One of the major weaknesses of the Interim Constitution is that the fight to include rights known as Second Generation Rights was lost. These include workers' rights outlined in Cosatu's Workers' Charter and women's rights which have been put into the Women's Charter of the National Women's Coalition. Some of these rights are the right to a job, the right to houses and the right to a living wage.

When we look at these rights we can see that these are the demands of the oppressed and exploited. It is really these rights that will begin to bring about a better life for the poor. The present rights in the Interim Constitution, such as the right to private property, are rights which will really benefit the rich. It is they that need to protect their many houses, factories and farms. For the unemployed in squatter camps these individual rights mean very little if conditions in their daily lives are not improved.



The struggle continues

Rights in a Constitution will not end women's oppression. But these rights can be used as a mobilising tool by women and workers' organisations. Women workers and their organisations can mobilise for the implementation of these laws, the monitoring of their implementation as well as raising other laws and demands which are not contained in the Constitution.

The Interim Constitution is not the final Constitution. We need to mobilise and inform our representatives in parliament of our demands. We need to say what must be changed and added to the final constitution. The aim of fighting for better laws is to fight for conditions that will encourage the mobilisation of working-class women and men.

In this way we are building our organisations to take forward the struggle against all forms of exploitation and oppression. ★



DIVIDING WOMEN AND MEN

Women's oppression under capitalism

The present-day problems of women workers are not personal, individual problems. They are social problems which women suffer as members of this society, as workers and as women. So, if we want to solve women workers' problems, we have to tackle them as part of the problems of the whole society

What kind of society are we living in? It is a capitalist society that, without workers, could not keep running for a day, not even for an hour. A capitalist society is one in which people can be broadly divided into the capitalists and the workers. The capitalists have the factories, the machinery, the raw material and the money. These are all means of production.

What about the workers? Because they do not have anything, they have to work for the capitalists to survive. The capitalists would not be able to make any profit without workers. But, because they control the means of production, bosses can take as much as they can from the labour of the workers while giving out only a small sum in wages.

Since the beginning of this century, the apartheid laws of the government benefitted the capitalists in this country. Through these laws, the bosses were able to pay African workers far less than what they paid white workers. Today, these apartheid laws have been abolished, but African workers and particularly African women workers are still getting the lowest wages.

Women workers share the same conditions as men workers. So why is it that women workers earn at the most only three-quarters of the wages of men workers? Why is that women's labour is valued much less?

Double burden

Before capitalism, in societies known as 'primitive communism', women and men did different kinds of work. But the work of women was respected because of the important role which women play in bearing and rearing children. However, when communities began to produce more than what they needed to survive (a surplus) this situation changed. Class divisions began to emerge between the majority of workers and the few that owned and controlled the surplus. As these divisions grew, there was also a stricter division of work between men and women, and the role of women in society became downgraded.

As capitalist society developed, the division of labour between men and women became more stark. Work outside the home was considered the work of men, while work at home was considered the work of women. Even while women were kept very busy with the work of bearing and raising children, serving their husbands, cleaning, washing, cooking, etc., they were not considered as workers and their work was not valued. Why is this so?

It is because the work of women at home is actually making an important contribution to the profit of the capitalists. Think what would happen if the women who silently go about their work should suddenly refuse to do it? The male workers would have to pay for

their meals and for laundry. So, if women demand to be paid for the work in the home, the daily expenses of the workers would rise considerably and wages would have to go up. The employers are able to keep wages low because of the unpaid work of women at home.

However, with the rise of prices and rent, many workers' families cannot manage on the wages of men alone. Many women also need to work in the factories. But this does not mean that women are being freed from housework. And the employers make use of women's work outside the home to push down even more the wages of all workers. By maintaining that women are not the breadwinners of their families, they pay women lower wages than those of men. Lower wages for women are also used as a way to threaten men workers. If men workers complain or protest, employers threaten to hire women in their place.

So we see that, by discriminating against women, the capitalists divide the workers and control the whole labour force. As well as dividing men and women, the capitalists also use differences such as those between the educated and under-educated, the old and young, and so on. They divide workers to keep the wages low.

Working in the factory and managing housework, each woman has to bear a double burden. But her work in the factory also lets her to free herself from total dependence on a man for her existence. It gives her a chance to develop as an independent human person. With poor working conditions and low wages, most women workers are not totally independent, but at least they can escape from being at home all day every day.

Furthermore, working in the factory, a woman comes to realise that she is not the only one to endure suffering. Instead, all women workers suffer these conditions. And she also comes to realise that the oppression of women increases the exploitation of all workers. ★



Adapted from an article in a publication of the Committee of Asian Women

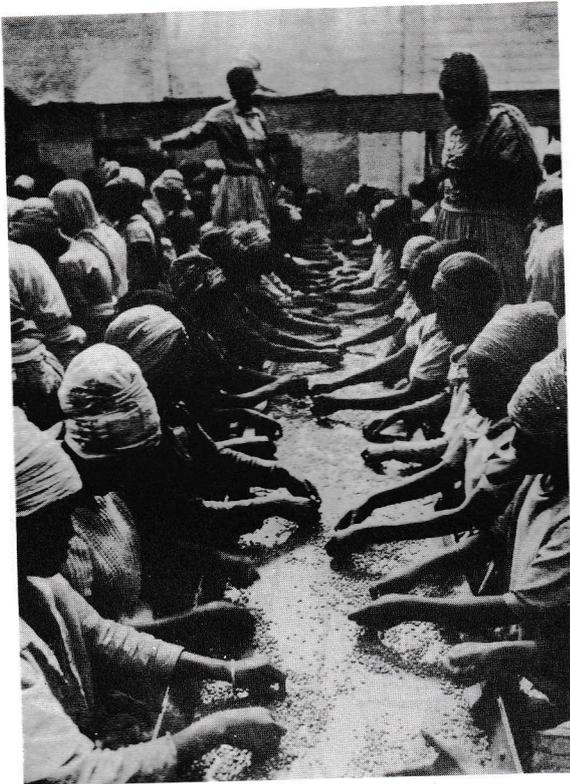
*The oppression
of women
increases the
exploitation of
all workers!*





Women workers and the world economy

Today the conservative politics of world capitalism aims to take away the gains which women and their organisations have made. It is part of a worldwide attack on the living standards of the working class.



In struggles over the last fifty years, women workers and their organisations have won many rights for women. Maternity rights, the right to legal abortions, protection against sexual discrimination, equal opportunities and affirmative action have become part of government law in a number of countries.

Today the 'new world order' of America, Europe and Japan is attacking these gains. In many countries the living standards of the poor have become worse. The situation of working class women has especially deteriorated.

While the prices of food, clothing and decent housing increase, unemployment grows. Many of the industries and factories where women work are closing down or moving to other countries. Many women workers are being forced into part-time, casual or home work. They work under very bad conditions and for low wages.

For the bosses, the world economic crisis means a drop in their profits. Their solutions include:

- cutting down on state spending on health, education and other social services
- cutting down on state subsidies on food and fuel
- attacks on trade union and worker rights to weaken the labour movement
- cutting back on wages and wage increases
- industrial and workplace restructuring.

These policies are often imposed on less developed countries through the structural adjustment policies of international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

For workers worldwide, these 'solutions' of the bosses and governments mean a drop in living standards and weaker organisations. How does this affect women workers in particular?

Women workers in the highly industrialised countries

Just after World War II, many European countries like Britain, Sweden and Australia implemented national policies on health, housing, education and social welfare. New social services meant two things for women workers. First, the government provided welfare, childcare, and healthcare on a national level, and so women gained support for their domestic work, and were more able to join the formal labour force. Second, the growth of these services increased the demand for female labour because many of these jobs were and still are seen as 'women's work'.

The present economic and industrial restructuring has badly affected women in these countries. Cutting back welfare services means fewer jobs for women. Privatisation of state industries has led to jobs becoming part-time rather than full-time. There is a shift from permanent jobs for men

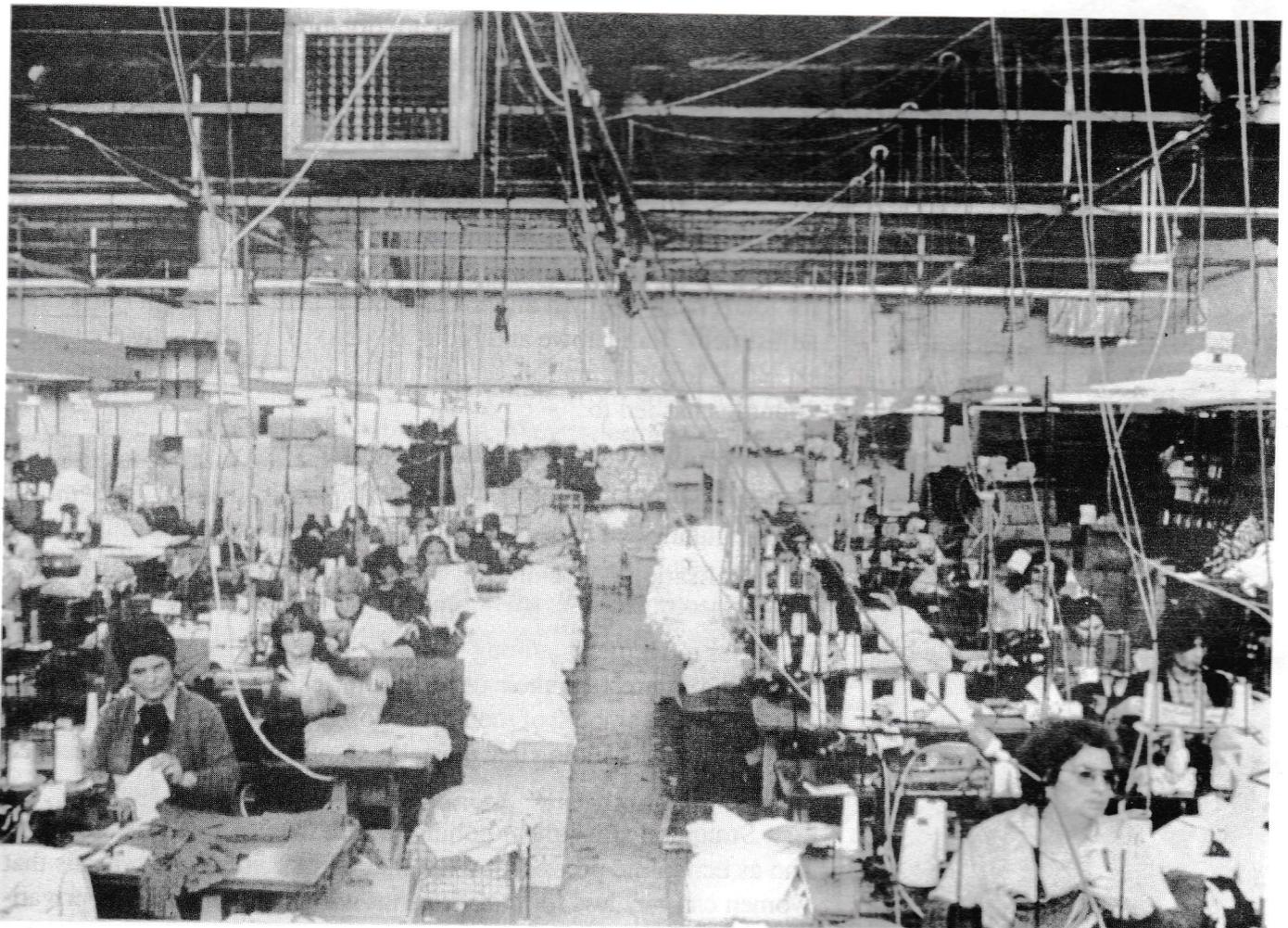
workers in factories to casualised jobs for women working for sub-contractors, in sweatshops and at home. In many countries, more and more women are moving into the unregulated economy, often called the 'informal sector', selling goods on the streets and from their homes to get an income.

The decline in the public sector has also meant that women have more domestic responsibilities again. So women must look for part-time work or homework so that they can do their domestic work as well. This situation is increasing the 'double burden' of women.

Part-time work is not a new development. What is new is the growth of part-time work. In Britain, nearly half of all women's jobs are now part-time. Bosses prefer part-time work because it is cheaper. Part-timers have very few of the benefits full-time workers have. They are usually classified as unskilled and have little chance of promotion. And it is more difficult for part-time workers to be in unions.

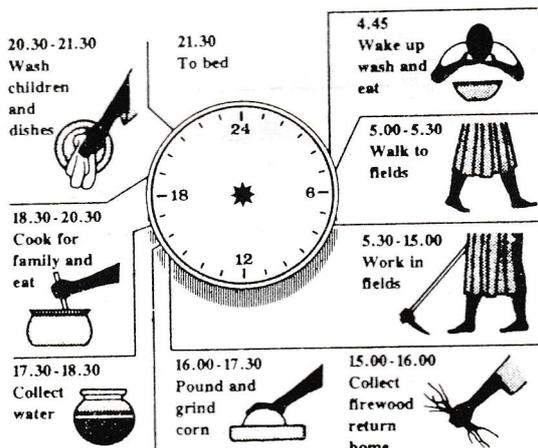
Homework is another way of super-exploiting women workers that is increasing. (There is an article about this on page 45).

These developments have affected organisations like unions and women's organisations. Trade unions, which are losing their traditional base among men workers in factories, are having to develop new ways to organise among women workers, part-timers and homeworkers. Without strong organisations, women workers in the industrialised countries find it hard to challenge economic restructuring.



A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

A day in the life of a typical rural African woman



Workers' World 14

Women in the newly industrialised countries – Asia

The Asian region includes countries like Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka. The economy of the region is very strong. Women workers have become the backbone of Asia's export manufacturing industry. And more and more are now also joining the growing industrial workforces in China and Vietnam.

Women in Asia are also the main workers in agriculture, domestic service and in service jobs in the tourism industry. Generally, women work in the lowest paid and most labour-intensive industries.

Bosses, particularly foreign bosses, have targetted women as the main workers for industries such as textiles, electronics and assembly work. Many of these industries are located in Free Trade Zones, where almost eighty percent of the workers are women. Free Trade Zones are industrial zones where foreign bosses set up to make goods only for export. Governments allow them to employ workers cheaply and help to suppress unions. They are given tax exemptions. They pay low rent. And they don't pay for setting up and maintaining the infrastructure of roads, power and buildings. If the bosses must pay rent and tax, they move their factories, even to another country. This has earned them the nickname 'runaway' companies. In China, they can use the cheapest labour of all, prison labour.

These bosses are targetting women, not just because they can be paid less than men, but also because they see Asian women as more obedient and dextrous, or nimble with their fingers than men. They use sexist stereotypes to exploit women.

But women workers in Asia are organising. They are helping to build trade unions and workers movements in countries like Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia. In South Korea and the Philippines, women have also organised themselves into women worker organisations.

Women in less industrialised countries

Many of the less industrialised countries have been forced to apply for loans from the IMF and to implement IMF policies of 'structural adjustment'. Zimbabwe and India are just two of the many countries.

The implementation of the IMF's programmes in the poorer countries has led to:

- the devaluation of the country's currency
- privatisation of industry and services
- deregulation of the economy
- globalisation – opening up their domestic economies to foreign goods
- social movements among the poor to fight against the debt. By paying interest on their debts, countries have already more than covered the amount of money they originally borrowed. Therefore, many are demanding that the debts should be cancelled or changed to be less repressive.

Structural adjustment policies affect women as home managers and as economic producers. Devaluation of the currency means that women can buy less for their families with their money. The privati-

sation of public services such as health and social welfare means that greater responsibility is placed on women to take care of their families. Cut-backs also mean that many women workers lose their jobs or only find work in the smaller factories, in sweatshops and in homeworking, where they are not covered by protection and benefits.

Women worldwide, but particularly women in the poorest countries, are affected by the domination of the world economy by multinational companies. Multinationals (MNCs) are companies that operate in more than one country. Since the 1970s, MNCs have gained more and more control of the world economy.

- They are stronger and richer than many national governments
- They push for export-orientated industries
- They dominate different industries and trade in the world

Multinationals control seventy percent of world trade, and much of this trade is inter-firm trade, that is, between branches of the same parent firm. Many women all over the world work for MNCs. Women in South Africa may work for the same boss as women in the USA or Germany or Malaysia, for example.

Through their economic power, MNCs affect policies on such vital issues as food and health. Women in the less developing countries are responsible for providing food for their families. A survey in 1985 showed that women do three-quarters of all agricultural work in Africa. The majority of women do this through subsistence farming, but such farming is under threat by the practices of agribusiness MNCs involved in growing food crops for export. More and more women are driven off the land into factories involved in processing the food. Increasingly, MNCs have come to determine what is grown, where and how, how it is processed and where it is distributed.

MNCs also dominate the pharmaceutical or drug (medicine) industry. This is one of the most profitable industries in the world. These companies produce and sell everything from soaps and cosmetics to contraceptives and baby foods. They determine the prices of medicines which also push up the price of medical care. Their power leads to medical treatment based on taking medicines, rather than healthcare based on providing clean water, food and shelter. Women are usually responsible for the health of their children and families. In such ways, the activities of the world's most powerful corporations have a direct impact on the daily lives of women the world over. ★

'And we, the housewives, ask ourselves: What have we done to incur this foreign debt? Is it possible that our children have eaten too much? It is possible that our children have studied in the best colleges? Or do they wear the best clothes? Have we improved our standard of living? Have our wages become so great? Together we say: No, no, we have not eaten too much. No we have not dressed any better. We do not have better medical assistance. Then to whom have the benefits gone? Why are we the ones who have to pay for this debt?'

— Dominga De Velasquez, a woman from Bolivia





WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

Cosatu's economic policy

What does reconstruction and development mean for women workers? Jane Barrett tests Cosatu economic policy. Does it take account of the issues facing women? Who formulated the policy, and who is implementing it? Does it meet women workers' needs, and does it empower them?



This article is adapted from an article in Agenda No. 18, 1993

In March 1993, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) held an Economic Policy Conference. This adopted a framework to guide its policies on the economy. The framework has four pillars:

- redistribution
- industrial policy
- the role of the state
- building workers' power.

To carry out this policy, Cosatu has encouraged new negotiating forums with business and government. At the same time, it has embarked on campaigns to support the negotiations. These include a national campaign for centralised bargaining, struggles against retrenchments, and the fight to improve the wages and working conditions of workers in low-paid sectors.

Cosatu's long-term goal is socialism. This should mean a radical redistribution of both resources and political power. 'Growth through Redistribution' has become the Cosatu motto. But how much does this policy, both in theory and in practice, address the needs of the poorer sections of the working class – the unemployed, the rural poor, the informal sector and, in particular, working class women?

Women make up one third of South Africa's workforce. A 1985 survey showed that one quarter of the manufacturing workforce is women, mostly in the textile and clothing industries. Ninety-five percent of all domestic workers are women, as are 57 percent of clerical and sales workers. Two-thirds of all professionals are women. Many women professionals are teachers and nurses. They are at the bottom of the pile as far as income and status are concerned, earning far less than semi-skilled workers.

In education, there are more girls than boys in secondary schools. But three times more boys than girls have post-matric qualifications, apart from teaching and nursing diplomas. In 1988, out of the two thousand people in the motor industry who were qualified apprentices, only ten were women. And in the whole country, only thirty industrial companies had women apprentices.

In the rural areas, men retrenched from work in the towns are competing with women for jobs. In the past, land was allocated by the chiefs in the name of men. But, because many men are absent from rural areas, women have increasingly controlled the use of land. As unemployed men have returned, control has shifted back to them. Women in commercial farming are not much better off. They work as domestic or seasonal workers. Conditions are bad and wages very low.

Cosatu argues that redistribution should be carried out through state intervention – nationalisation, price control, and other laws and policies. Providing basic necessities such as electricity, water, housing, education, and health and welfare is seen as crucial to the process of redistribution. What is the progress on some of these issues for women workers?

● *Electricity*

About 3,5 million households in South Africa have no electricity, and it will cost about ten billion rands to connect them all. An Electricity Forum made up of Eskom, business, the civics' organisation Sanco, and Cosatu has been negotiating about increasing electricity production and supply. Women's needs must be taken into account.

● *Housing*

Cosatu has been active in the National Housing Forum (NHF). It has argued for labour-based construction, and reached agreement on the financing of building houses, on the supply of materials at subsidized rates, and on changing laws to get land released quickly. There are also guidelines to transform hostels.

But the report of a Cosatu workshop on housing in April 1993 says nothing about the need to redress gender imbalance in ownership. African women have been historically denied the right to rent or own homes. Local authorities still give preference to men. Women could also be sidelined when it comes to converting hostels into family homes. There is silence on these points.

As for labour-based construction, the unemployed are being targeted for these jobs. The NEF speaks about ensuring the employment of women. But how will it overcome the fact that women are excluded from training and employment in the construction industry? A quota of women and a mechanism for monitoring the progress of women in such projects may be necessary.



● *Health services*

Cosatu has called for a national health system. The Cosatu Gender Forum says there must be education on women's health issues such as cervical cancer, contraception and abortion. Violence against women is also a healthcare issue. Over one thousand women a day are raped in South Africa. And women are battered in over half of all South African marriages/partnerships.

● *Industrial policy*

The combined effect of apartheid policies, cheap labour, import substitution and poor development of human resources have resulted in a flawed manufacturing and industrial sector, says Cosatu. So, there must be changes in trade policies, investment and production strategies, and the application of technology. It also sees human resource development as crucial – developing the skills and education of workers on the factory floor.

But the industrial strategy research commissioned by Cosatu has focused just on the manufacturing sector. Most of Cosatu's women members are found in the service and commercial unions.

● *The role of the state*

Cosatu argues that reconstruction and development cannot be achieved by market forces alone. A high degree of state intervention is needed. But, as delegates to the Second National Women's Conference pointed out, local councils and other structures of public control are completely male-dominated. There must be a clear programme of affirmative action to address this.

● *Worker empowerment*

Building workers' power has two aspects: linking workers' control to democracy, and the question of ownership.

With regard to worker control, where are the women workers? Women are very poorly represented within Cosatu. In 1991, Cosatu's women membership was 36 percent. The Economic Policy Conference of March 1992 had not more than a ten percent attendance by women delegates. The conclusions were referred back to the Central Executive Committee (CEC). This 70 person committee has only four women members. Women are also poorly represented in most affiliates' national, regional and local executive structures. If we are absent from union structures, how can we be expected to participate in making policy and implementing it?

As for ownership, Cosatu is committed to social ownership. It says that basic infrastructure and services should remain in public hands. Also there should be selective nationalisation to determine the direction of the economy. Public ownership is important to women. For example, publicly-owned health and welfare services help women participate in the economy.

Cosatu's economic policy holds enormous potential for long-term growth and for meeting the basic needs of the people. But Cosatu has a long way to go in both policy and practice to make sure that the specific economic needs of women workers are met and that women are empowered in the process. ★



Reconstruction for working-class women

Victory is ours! We have a big majority in the National Assembly, and Nelson Mandela is our President.

A less celebrated victory is that we have won a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which is concerned about the needs of South African women. The ANC-SACP-Cosatu alliance and the mass democratic organisations have committed themselves to implementing this programme.

South African women are not all the same. There are class, racial, urban/rural, religious, language, cultural and age divisions amongst them. Can we be sure that reconstruction and development strategies address the interests and needs of working-class women? Governments often do not see women. And they very seldom see black working-class women. The challenge to ensure that working-class women are not ignored, whether they are unemployed, rural or industrial workers, housewives, mothers etc, lies on the shoulders of the labour movement, the left and specifically on the SACP.

Reconstruction for working-class women

For women workers, their emancipation begins with implementing the reconstruction programme. This programme ensures that, amongst other things, women have access to land, to training and are integrally involved in all sections of the job creation programmes.

The aim of the reconstruction programme must be:

- to block unilateral restructuring of society
- to unlock resources to meet the needs of the majority of South Africans
- to build democratic economic decision-making
- and vitally, it has to include education to equip people to participate in decision-making and implementation in an informed manner.

In all of these areas, we must actively consider the needs of women workers.

The RDP is now the programme of the Government of National Unity. The cabinet is responsible for deciding how to implement the RDP. In the cabinet, there are ministers from the NP and IFP who do not want to build a better life for the workers of South Africa. And they are even less committed to women workers than men workers.

This means that we will have to fight to protect workers' interests. We will have to fight for money and resources to build houses, schools, creches and hospitals. And we will have to fight for running water, electricity and sanitation. This struggle is not just a struggle within parliament – it must also be fought by workers and their organisations outside of parliament. The theme of our organisations and struggle should be to get reconstruction and development going.

Jenny Schreiner, one of our women representatives in the National Assembly, looks at what the reconstruction and development programme means for working-class women. She argues that women must struggle to make the RDP relevant to their needs.



So we can ask what the RDP means for women workers lives – but the answer can only be given in part. We can say what the RDP *can* mean. But it is up to workers' representatives in government and women workers themselves and their political and trade union organisations to ensure the successful implementation of what the RDP and the election campaign has promised.

The needs of urban and industrial working class women must not be prioritised at the expense of rural working class women. For example, what is appropriate for African women in the rural areas, (for example land distribution directly to landless women rather than women having access to land through a man), will not be the same as what is needed by Muslim women working in the clothing industry in Cape Town. Here the need for promotion, better and equal wages, paid maternity leave and on-the-job training are the burning issues.

Reconstruction and development cannot be separated from overcoming the practical obstacles to women's political, social and economic involvement. We must:

- provide child-care facilities
- campaign for shared housework
- address the fears and reality of rape and domestic violence
- ensure that women are trained
- change working hours to suit women
- ensure women's access to credit without needing the permission of their husband, father or male relative.

Without these measures, women cannot participate equally in society. Women's political representation and women's rights cannot become real

without changes in their daily lives. There is a crucial link between the broader political and legal rights of women and the conditions under which women live and struggle.

Take the struggle forward

While the RDP will empower women in many concrete ways, it will not happen over night nor without a struggle. Gender sensitive reconstruction and development must be part of the struggle against sexist, racist and elitist attitudes. And it must be part of the wider struggle to change the social and economic conditions which determine gender, race and class relations. Transforming culture and tradition plays an important role in the change that is necessary for a long-term shift away from discrimination. The sexist attitudes of both men and women are rooted in the way we live and produce in our society, but are also woven into our cultural attitudes.

The state, the legislatures, the Constitution, law courts, the private sector, the family and household relations, as well as other



organisations in society, all oppress women in different ways. The struggle for women's emancipation must be fought on all these fronts.

The transition period that we are in is one of struggle. Working class women have representatives in legislatures at provincial and national levels, such as Ma Lydia, Thenjiwe Mtintso, Susan Shabangu. Women in the rural areas, the factories and in informal jobs must approach these women to fight battles for them in the government and legislature. Women in the legislatures should find their post bag full of letters from women writing about their problems and asking for steps to be taken to solve them.

There are lawyers who have worked hard to change the law for the benefit of women. Women workers have access to these lawyers and through them to the courts. Women workers' rights, for example, maternity benefits, time off for children's medical and other needs, can be won through union struggles and through courts. Unions and political organisations should teach women workers about these new rights. And strategise how to challenge the bosses, the government or anybody else when these rights are denied.

Reconstruction and development which empowers women does not benefit women alone. The active inclusion of, and participation by women in all areas of society will benefit the society as a whole. For example, the integration of women into the economy in a more equal way can change the nature of the working day, working hours, and what is expected from a single worker. This lightens the load on the shoulders of men workers, offering more flexibility in our conception of the right and duty to work. Unions and political organisations should convince the entire working class community of this. The issue of empowering women must not become divisive and weaken the workers. ★



Questions and activities

1. Prepare a role play involving a women worker, a shopsteward, a lawyer and a member of the Provincial or National Assembly. The play must show the role of different structures and people in taking forward the fight for women workers' rights. For example, how should the representative in the National Assembly take forward the struggle for maternity benefits? What problems is he/she likely to experience? You can also focus on other issues like sexual harassment, child-care facilities etc.
 - ★ Do you think that child care and water in your house are more or less important than the right to non-discriminatory treatment? How do you think these two areas of struggle fit together?
 - ★ What channels do women workers have to take forward their fight so that we have a democratic government?
 - ★ Will the RDP change your life overnight? How can you ensure that it does change your life?
2. Discuss in small groups:
 - ★ How can women workers use women and worker members in the Provincial and National Assemblies?
3. What are the biggest problems in your life at work and at home? How do you think the government should solve these problems? Does the RDP say anything about these issues? If not write to one of the members of the National or Provincial Assembly to tell them this.

The RDP: How does it address women's issues?

This article is written by Khanya College's Community Division in Johannesburg. It highlights the 'gender content' of the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme and analyses how it will affect the empowerment and development of millions of women in our country.



We saw the long queues of women in polling stations. For black women, this was a historic moment to cast their first vote. Their vote means a lot. They have yearned for so long to reclaim their right to have greater power and control over their lives. And now is the time.

The African National Congress which represents the majority in the Government of National Unity is committed to the realisation of our vision of a better life through its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). 'The RDP is a socio-economic policy framework which seeks to mobilise all our people and our country's resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future'.

What does the RDP mean for the masses of women from rural area, the urban informal sectors, overcrowded and violence-torn townships, factories and squatter camps? How does the RDP address the gender inequalities in our society?

Meeting basic needs

Women are disadvantaged in all areas of our society. They form the majority of the poor. The RDP emphasises that job creation programmes, access to land, housing, water and electricity, public transport, basic health care, social security and welfare should target women first. Women should be part of implementing the RDP at a local, district, provincial and national level to ensure that these programmes are gender-sensitive.

● Access to education and training

Women have either been denied access to education and training or received an education which entrenches their inferior role in the family, in the workplace and in society at large. The RDP stresses that education and training opportunities for women must be created to tap their full potential. A wide range of non-traditional curriculae should be offered to improve their economic and social status. Special attention must be given to illiterate adult women in the rural areas. Measures must be taken to give full recognition to the work and skills of women including domestic work and child-rearing.

● ***Building political participation***

A key theme throughout the RDP is ensuring women's participation and representation in the process of reconstruction and development. Women must make sure that gender issues are included in the planning and implementation of programmes.

The RDP says that 'women must be represented in all institutions, councils and commissions, and gender issues must be included in the terms of reference of these bodies.' (p.122)

'At local government level a women's portfolio should be established with powers to scrutinise local authority programmes and budgets for gender-sensitivity.' (p.130)

● ***Ending economic discrimination***

To ensure that women will no longer experience economic discrimination, the RDP intends to democratise the economy by empowering women to participate in decisions in both the private and public sectors.

The RDP emphasises that any development effort must take into account the situation of women. Women are the majority of the poor in the under-resourced rural areas and the overcrowded informal settlements. Women entrepreneurs in small-scale and micro-enterprises and in agriculture must be supported by the government. They must be provided with access to finance, market and training opportunities.

● ***Affirmative action***

The RDP is committed to affirmative action measures. It says that within formal employment, policies for hiring and promotion should not discriminate against women. Pregnant women should be provided with job security. Child-care support must be ensured to allow women equal opportunity for employment. Sexual harassment in the workplace must be prohibited through legislation.

● ***Reproductive rights***

The RDP proposes that 'every woman must have the right to choose whether or not to have an early termination of pregnancy according to her individual beliefs.' (pp.46-47) This will give women greater control over their own bodies.

● ***Legal Aid Fund***

The RDP envisages a judicial system that is legitimate, accessible and affordable. It states that 'a legal aid fund must be established for women to test their rights in court.' (p.124)

● ***Tax and budgetary allocations***

It is spelt out in the RDP that a gender-sensitive tax structure should take into account the unpaid labour of women at home as well as child-care costs.

'Future budgetary allocations must concretely show the commitment of a future government to women's development and empowerment. The budget should be gender-sensitive. It should contain a social impact statement detailing how budgetary allocations affect women with respect to workload, income, education and career options.' (p.145)

Does the RDP meet women's needs?

The RDP is hailed as a people-orientated and a people-driven programme. It is a product of consultations involving grassroots organisations, NGO's, academic institutions and private agencies.

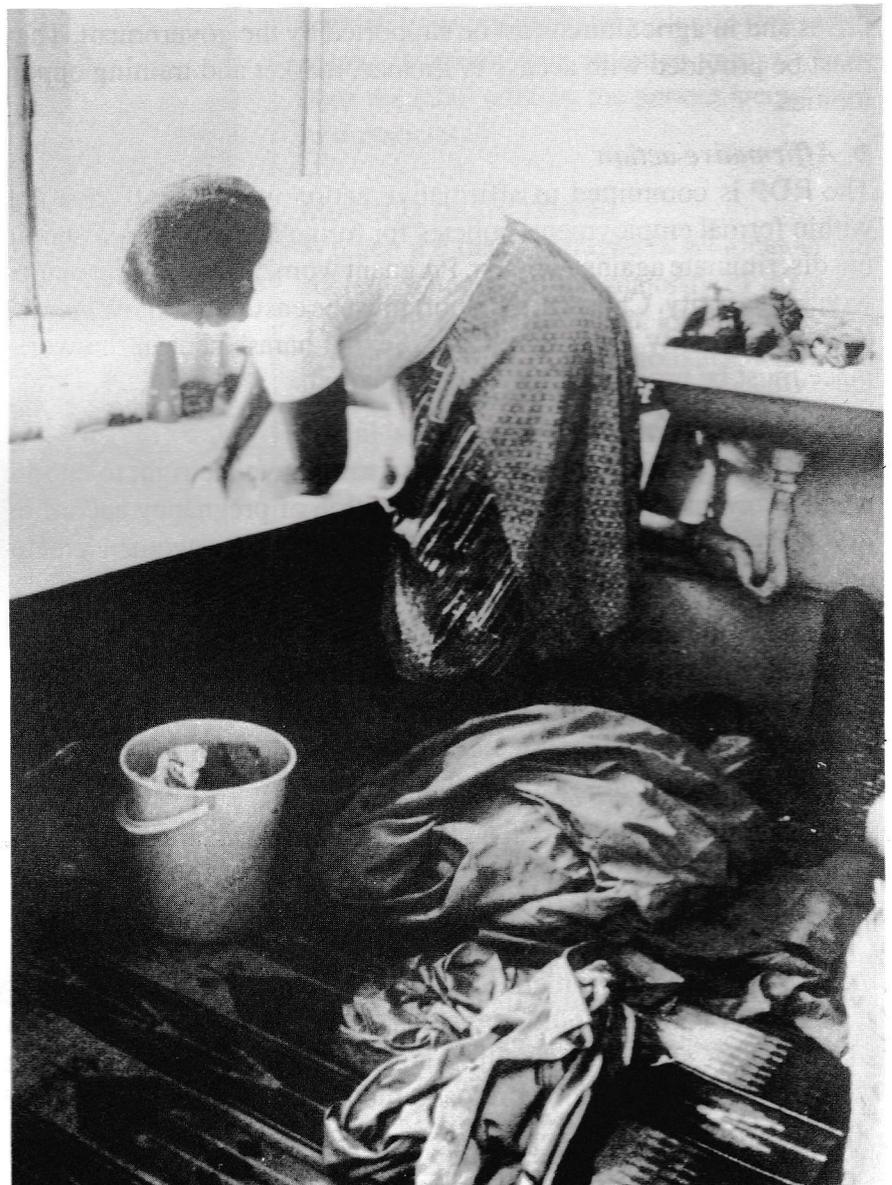
In general, it is pro-women in its content. Women are given a prominent role in rebuilding, restructuring and developing the country. It is promising in improving the economic, legal and social status of women. It tries to mobilise women's energy in democratising the process of development and governance.

There are, however, issues and problems faced by women which are not adequately addressed in the RDP. These must be debated not only by policy-makers but also by progressive women's groups and community-based associations. Some of these issues are:

● *What should be prioritised?*

The majority of MP's and top politicians in the country are men. Are they going to prioritise the development of women?

The empowerment of women in the economic sphere is a big priority. Rural development should also be prioritised – since the



Domestic workers urgently need legislation to improve their position, but the RDP overlooks their problems.

majority of women are living in poverty in the rural areas. The programme for land redistribution should be implemented without delay. Attention needs to be given to the informal economy on which many women rely for the survival of their families. Support services like credit, market outlets, infrastructure, training opportunities as well as child care support for women in this sector must be provided by the government.

The RDP overlooks domestic workers. Improving their economic position means that effective legislation must be passed covering working hours, wages, leave, pension and time to pursue education as part of the work contract.

● *The meaning of affirmative action*

Throughout the RDP, there is a commitment to women's participation in decision-making structures. But there is no clear policy on a quota system for women. Some view the quota system as 'tokenism'. However, the experience of other countries has been positive in achieving significant results for women. Policy-makers should further debate this issue taking into account the long-term impact of the quota system not only on women's development but also on the improvement of the socio-economic and political systems in the country as a whole.

● *Dealing with 'taboo' issues*

Important issues and problems like rape, domestic violence, women's safety in the streets, prostitution, lobola, polygamy and the sharing of housework are not addressed in the RDP. These issues strongly affect the day-to-day lives of women. If they are ignored, the equal and full participation of women in reconstruction and development will not be realised.

● *Confronting tribal authorities*

Rural women have always faced the overpowering authority of most tribal chiefs. The chiefs control almost every aspect of their lives through the economic and political power they wield in the villages. Any reconstruction and development programme must recognise this as it will be a great obstacle in breaking the chains of poverty and oppression long suffered by rural women.

● *Women's oppression in the family*

The RDP focuses on only three areas of power: the state, the economy and civil society. But the struggle to end gender inequality needs to go further. Women's oppression is often more strongly felt in the family. If the RDP is serious about fighting 'sexism', it must educate both men and women on questions such as sexual divisions and socialisation processes which reinforce the oppression of women in all areas of society.

The RDP says that 'development is about active involvement and growing empowerment.'



● *Democratising reconstruction and development*

One of the six basic principles of the RDP is that it should be a people-driven process. It states that 'development is not about the delivery of goods to a passive citizenry. It is about active involvement and growing empowerment.' However, the people have great expectations about improving the quality of their lives. This puts the government under enormous pressure to deliver large-scale services and projects in the short term which may compromise the social goals of the RDP.

Large private companies are already competing over contracts for the housing, health, sewerage, and water projects of the RDP. It is likely that large international NGO's (non-governmental organisations) will share out the rest of the work between themselves, as local organisations do not have the capacity to immediately deliver on the scale required. An approach which focuses more on process would ensure the empowerment of communities and local organisations and especially women. It would also ensure people's control of the process, but it would necessarily be slower in the delivery of the 'goods'.

There is likely to be a tension between producing large quantities of houses, clinic, taps and other infrastructure, and the less visible but equally important goals of the democratisation of society and the ending of gender inequalities. Will the RDP be output-orientated or process-orientated?

● *Compromising women's needs*

Recently the RDP was criticised strongly by the private sector as too ambitious, unrealistic and creating false expectations. Financing its implementation is still a big question for many. How will these issues impact on the RDP's commitment to eradicate all forms of gender discrimination and oppression? For example, the financing of women's education and training may be neglected in favour of financing high infrastructural projects which will directly benefit mostly male workers and big businesses. The tax incentives for women may be scrapped to expand the financial base of the RDP. Women's access to land ownership may be compromised in the name of 'peace and reconciliation' with white male farmers. Likewise, compromises with tribal chiefs may overshadow the RDP's commitment to over-rule discriminatory customary laws. Such issues may pressurise the Government of National Unity to make concessions at the expense of marginalised women.

● *The constitution and the RDP*

Some provisions in the Interim Constitution contradict the commitments of the RDP. For example, the Interim Constitution guarantees the powers and rights of traditional leaders. This may delay any effort to free rural women from practices and laws which are oppressive. And to what extent will the male-dominated national or provincial parliaments regulate indigenous laws in the face of fierce resistance from powerful tribal chiefs?

While the RDP supports affirmative action and a major change in the civil service, the Interim Constitution protects all existing civil servants' jobs.





The Interim Constitution ensures that no land will be expropriated unless the landowner is paid. What changes can landless women expect when the constitution guarantees the property rights of those who own 86% of the land?

So while the RDP is aiming to achieve the best for the people, the constitution which is the highest governing law of the country may restrict the implementation of this goal.

● *Joining hands*

Through the creation of a women's portfolio at the local level, the RDP intends to make its programmes and budgets gender-sensitive. The Interim Constitution has a provision for the establishment of a Commission on Gender Equality. These aim to give women more power in decision-making and planning. However, the responsibility of ensuring women's empowerment and development should not only lie with women. Men should also take responsibility in studying and analysing gender issues.

The women's movement as well as the democratic movement as a whole, must ensure that the battle for a gender-sensitive reconstruction programme is won. It is only through the efforts of women and men from all sectors of society that the new South Africa will truly be a non-sexist society. ★

Will the RDP sacrifice the needs and hopes of rural women to please white farmers and the black tribal authorities?



**Equal pay for equal
value of work**

**Recognise our work
as skilled**

**Safe and healthy
working conditions**

**Paid paternity and
maternity leave**

**Time off for
breastfeeding**

Menstruation leave

Free pap smears

**An end to sexual
harassment**

**No compulsory
overtime work**



Dema

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**Free childcare and
schooling for our
children**

**Access to adult
education and
training**

**Safe and affordable
transport**

**Affordable health
care**

**The right to own
houses and land**

The right to organise

The right to strike

A living wage

Work for all





Post-war reconstruction: Women in Britain

In WORKERS' WORLD 12, Khanya College's Community Division looked at reconstruction after the second world war in Europe. This article will focus mainly on the experience of working class women in Britain in the same period. Did post-war reconstruction benefit them?

Women before the war

In the years before the World War 2 in 1939, the bosses faced a crisis. There was large scale unemployment, homelessness and ill health. The bosses responded by pushing women out of industrial employment. Those who were lucky enough to remain employed were used mostly as cheap, part-time labour.

The Nazi regime in Germany responded to rising unemployment by encouraging women and young girls to rather perform household duties. It passed a series of laws which limited the employment of women. Women were also denied opportunities to further their education. It also provided incentives to young women who voluntarily left their jobs to perform household duties.

In Britain both the public and private sector responded to the crisis by limiting employment opportunities for women. Women were used as unskilled labour which was poorly paid. They were also given less wages for the same jobs as men.

The labour movement in this period was dominated by a conservative leadership. They were unable to unite men and women workers. Tensions between male and female workers were openly expressed with rising unemployment. Men saw women, not capitalism, as the cause of unemployment and falling wages. Women responded by turning away from trade unions.

The war years

During the war things became very different. There was a shortage of labour during this period. More than two million women entered industry and more than 500 thousand women joined the armed forces and civil defence in Britain alone.

The demand for women's labour caused the British government to encourage the full use of women's abilities at work and to recognise their responsibility at home. Women now had to make independent decisions with regards to the running of the household. The war had caused a big change in the sexual division of labour.

Other things also changed. In Britain, the government established the National Health Service which led to a dramatic decrease in the maternal mortality rate. The government also established maternity homes in safe rural areas and encouraged pregnant women to spend the last days of their pregnancy in these homes. Special food rations were given to pregnant women to ensure that they had an adequate diet. Women were also given time off to go to ante-natal clinics. The state provided day care centres which were fully subsidised. Since women often had to work at places far away from home, they demanded fully subsidised transport.

During these years, the British government encouraged the en-skilling of women. It encouraged women to go and study engineering and agriculture. And went out of its way to convince both trade unions and bosses that women could do 'men's' jobs. Now that women were employed in industry, they saw the need for trade unions more clearly. They recognised their common experiences and organised around them within union structures.

Post war reconstruction: what did it mean for women?

After the war, the economy in Europe and Britain expanded rapidly. Production was reorganised which raised productivity and the amount of goods produced. The expansion of the economy led to increased state spending which improved the quality of life of ordinary people. This was due to the growing strength of the working-class movement. Although the workers movement was not able to win all its demands, the economic growth of this period led to labour shortages. The bosses were forced to pay workers higher wages. The increase in state spending and higher wage income led to the development of the welfare state.

Post war reconstruction and development of the welfare state did not benefit women immediately. Soon after the war the government closed the nurseries and day care centres set up during the war years. This made it difficult for women who were working. Women were generally forced out of industry. For women reconstruction meant returning to their role as wives and mothers.

High wages given to male workers was used to justify the claim that 'women did not have to work'. Women were restricted to light, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in industries such as clothing and tobacco. Professional women were mostly confined to teaching and nursing. Office work was the major form of employment for single women while married women were confined to domestic work. But compared to the years before the war, the proportion of women in the labour force increased.

Women workers in trade unions

In 1945 the Labour Party won the general election in Britain. The Labour Party was formed largely by the trade unions and was seen as representing workers' interests. It played a big role in developing the welfare state. It nationalised some of the key industries such as the steel industry. It set up the National Health System which was freely available. These reforms showed the extent to which the Labour Party was sympathetic to workers. But it failed to improve the position of women. This was mainly because of the attitude of the male workers who dominated the trade unions.

During the war, the men in trade unions felt threatened by the influx of the women into the factories. They responded by forcing the employers to reserve certain categories of work for male workers. This resulted in the passing of the Pre-War Restoration Act which was enforced after the war. This act guaranteed the enforcement of pre-war practices particularly in terms of defining jobs by sex. This attitude of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and its individual affiliates resulted in women being employed in unskilled work.

Some of the unions such as the railway workers pressed for the enforcement of the marriage bar. The marriage bar was used to block married women from being promoted and being used as part-time labour. They argued that the employment of married women led to them not having enough time to look after their children. The TUC refused to support the struggle to continue with fully subsidised nurseries and for equal opportunities after the war. This made it more difficult for women with children to go to work.



The attitude of the trade unions to the issue of day-care for small children exposed sexism in the unions. The TUC said: 'There is no doubt in the minds of the General Council that home is one of the most important spheres for a woman worker and that it would be doing a grave injury to the life of the nation if women were persuaded or forced to neglect their domestic duties in order to enter industry particularly where there are young children to cater for.'

The struggle for equal pay for equal work was a big struggle for women workers after the war. The TUC did not include this demand in its campaigns. In 1950, the general council of the TUC decided to leave this demand up to individual unions. There were affiliate unions who were supportive. They bargained with their bosses to pay equal wages to workers irrespective of gender. Although some unions took a progressive position on the issue of equal pay, they were not always consistent. They entered into settlements which increased the wage differential between male and female workers.

The increase of women in the labour force also showed in their membership of trade unions. This was increased by the rising numbers of married women who became employed after the war. Women carried on with the tradition of trade unionism which they experienced during the war period. The number of women joining trade unions increased. Despite this increase the TUC failed to take up issues which affected women workers. Its programmes were dominated by male workers. Some unions, including the TUC, had special structures for women. These were often used to marginalise women. This became more evident when women workers demanded women organisers. They were ignored. The lack of gender sensitivity within the trade unions tended to demobilise women.

Women struggle for equal pay in the Civil Service

In the 1950's the Conservative government in Britain announced its commitment to the principle of equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex. Women demanded to know the date upon which the principle of equal pay for equal work would be implemented. They also argued that the implementation of this principle meant that women should be trained to do the same work as men.

In 1951 the Civil Service National Whitley Council (staff side) organised a mass meeting demanding an announcement of the date to implement equal pay. This meeting marked the beginning of a four year equal pay campaign where unity amongst trade unions representing women was built. The TUC supported the campaign reluctantly.

At a local level, equal pay committees were established in different centres with delegates from different unions. In the laundry sector women organised a successful strike for a wage increase. This strike was organised and led by women.

The government responded by saying that the economy had not recovered and the implementation of this principle would lead to inflation. This sentiment was echoed by the bureaucracy in the TUC. But more affiliates began to support support the demands of the women workers. This forced the TUC to change its position. It argued that the government must implement the principle of equal pay for

equal work and the private sector would then follow. It was only in 1955 that the government announced the implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work.

Although women workers won their demand, the bureaucrats in the civil service were reluctant to implement it and only professional women benefited. In the private sector the unions were reluctant to bargain for the implementation of the equal pay for equal work principle. Some of the deals struck by unions and the bosses undermined the interests of women workers.

Post war reconstruction in Britain had a contradictory effect on women. On the one hand it reasserted the role of women as mothers, and so undermined the gains which women made during the war years. On the other hand the unity of women on the factory floor and the confidence built through their involvement in trade unions made it possible for women to fight for their rights even after the war. The reforms introduced by the welfare state were partly as a result of the heroic struggles waged by women. But the trade union movement failed to incorporate the demands of women workers into a programme which would unite all workers, both men and women, in a united struggle for a living wage. The experience of working women in Britain shows that women have to organise and fight for their rights in progressive organisations and government. ★

The Second World War saw the entry of large numbers of British women into factories





Women workers organise!

Women make up more than half of the working class. The amount of work that a woman does every day is a lot more than a man does. Yet most trade union members are men, and nearly all trade union leaders are men. Why is this?

What are the problems that get in the way of women workers organising? What are the ways to build the strength of women workers? What can South African trade unionists learn from the struggles of women workers in other countries? Here Sally Andrew looks at these issues.

Why should women workers organise? The Korean Women Workers' Association says:

'We women workers earn less than half of what men workers earn and we work longer hours. Our health suffers under compulsory overtime work. In addition, we have to shoulder the household chores. We are often harassed in the workplace and in times of strike we are even beaten up or suffer sexual torture. We are taught to obey and not to protest.

Despite all this, we women workers have been fighting at the front line against all forms of oppression. Women workers must join together and struggle in order that the special problems that women suffer become the problems of all workers; and so that all workers will join together to destroy the discrimination and oppression of women.'

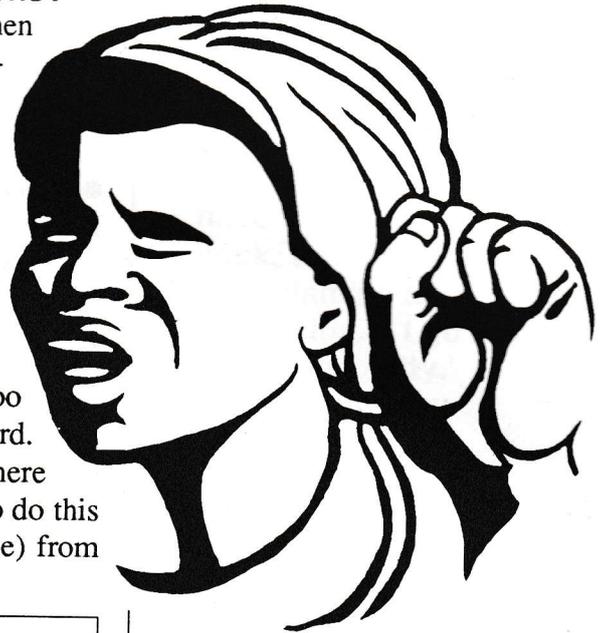
☛ *Women workers, what problems do you face at work and at home? What are your demands?*



Why are women not well represented in trade unions?

Traditional trade unions don't organise where most women work. Most of their energy goes into organising paid, full-time, factory- and industry-based urban workers. Although more and more women are working in industry, very many do work which is unpaid, isolated, or part-time. Many are in the informal sector or in rural areas. Women doing these jobs do not have the collective, shopfloor relationship with their fellow workers which factory-based workers do. They are isolated from each other, so they cannot be organised in the same way.

Male trade unionists may argue that these sectors are too difficult to organise. Unfortunately, they do not try very hard. Women workers in many parts of the world show us that there are ways of organising the difficult sectors. They are able to do this even when they get little support (and sometimes resistance) from mainstream trade unions.



• *What sorts of work do women do? Are these sectors well organised?*

The difficult sectors can be organised

● *Unpaid domestic work*

In many places in the world, women understand how important their unpaid domestic work is for the economy. They have organised themselves as housewives and as mothers. In South Africa there have been examples of this in our history. As part of SACTU's 'pound-a-day campaign' in the 1950s, women workers were arguing that they must be paid a wage for housework.

In Bolivia there is the federation of poor housewives, Amas de Casa. They have used their power as consumers to protest against the rising cost of food and other household goods. They marched through the streets demanding 'poor people's shops' in which they could control the prices. They have also been involved in setting up communal kitchens, clinics, childcare, and cooperatives.

In Argentina, working class women formed a Housewives' Trade Union. Elida, one of the founders of the union, said:

'In spite of working all day, bringing up our children, guaranteeing their education, food and health, and even though there are millions of us, our work is never recognised. Our work is so important that if we ever decide to organise a general strike, society would stop functioning. There would be no clean clothes to go out to work, no food for the children, etc.

'We demand the right to organise a union, like all workers in Argentina. And we want our work recognised through the payment of a salary, a pension, and health benefits. We called over the radio for women to join us. By August 1984 we had formed the Housewives Union of Argentina. By 1989 we had over 200 000 members.'

The mainstream trade union in Argentina still refuses to give the Housewives' Union formal recognition.

● *Part-time workers*

In Japan, the mainstream (male-dominated) trade union had a policy of not organising part-timers. Working-class women, who do ninety percent of part-time work, then started their own part-timers union. Their slogan was, 'Unionise to prevent being dirt'.

● *Domestic workers*

In South Africa, most African women have been employed as domestic workers at some stage of their lives. They have very low pay and terrible working conditions. In most places in the world, there are no laws protecting domestic workers. This sector is difficult to organise because the workers are separated from each other, and their lives and time are controlled by their madams. But still they have managed to organise themselves.

In South Africa there is SADWU (South African Domestic Workers Union). They have succeeded in getting better laws to protect them. Their message is, 'Our brothers and sisters are fighting on the factory floor and in the townships. We must fight the bosses family. We must not let the strength of our women run down the kitchen sink.' There are also domestic worker organisations in Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Canada, Britain, and elsewhere.

● *Self-employed women*

Many women all over the world work in the 'informal sector'. They make or buy things and then sell them. In some countries these women have become very well organised.

In India there is a trade union called Self Employed Women's Association. Their slogan is: 'We are so poor, but we are so many'. Through the union they negotiate their buying and selling prices. They have also started a 'poor women's bank', run by themselves. At this bank women can take loans without paying the high interest rates that the banks want. There is a new organisation in Durban (AFSEWU, the Association for the Establishment of a Self-Employed Women's Union) which is modelling itself on SEWA. The Working Women's Forum is a similar organisation in India. It sets up small credit structures for working women.

Another important section of self-employed women are sex workers, or prostitutes. Poverty forces millions of women into this degrading work. In Brazil alone there are four million women and girls in this profession. Here they have formed a Prostitutes Association. The ultimate aim of this organisation is to create a society in which there is no need for prostitution. But in the short-term there are many struggles and reforms to be won for prostitutes.

● *Rural workers*

Although some people talk about rural areas as 'backward', there are many examples of how rural women workers have been well organised. In South America there are many peasant and agricultural organisations that have had success in organising women.

Another empowering way of organising women workers is cooperatives. In Mozambique, women set up the General Union of Cooperatives. In 1990 this had eleven thousand members in 210 coops. As well as being a successful productive enterprise, they also



run literacy and other training classes. They have set up creches, schools and shops. The Mozambican women say, 'Our coops belong to us. We work together, and we share what we produce amongst ourselves.'

• *What ideas do you have about how to organise women in these difficult sectors in South Africa?*

Problems women face in trade unions

Although many women work in these difficult sectors, more and more are employed in mainstream industry. Usually they are making food and clothes, and in the service sector. Here it is easier for them to join existing trade unions. Women are often active and militant union members. But there are very few women in leadership and decision-making positions within the union. This is even true when nearly all the members of a union are women. Why is this?

● *Double shift*

Kathini Maloba, General Secretary of the Pan African Women Trade Unions, explains that the main problem blocking women's involvement in trade unions in Africa is the double responsibility of women – they also face so many demands from their families.

● *Resistance from men at home*

In Zimbabwe and Namibia women explain that, their husbands do not want them to attend union meetings. Men will not look after their own children while the women go out. They may also beat up the woman when she goes out against his wishes.

● *Union activities and meetings are unsuitable for women*

Isabel, from Uruguay, says that union life is arranged for people with no home responsibilities. She says: 'Meetings are held at times which aren't suitable for women. The meetings are late, you have to find someone to look after the kids, you have to wait a long time for the bus and it's dangerous at night because there are a lot of rapes. And then when you get to the meeting you find that it's the men who speak all the time – you can't get a word in – and they talk about things that aren't important to women. On top of that they use a kind of language that's difficult for us to understand.'

● *Unions are sometimes not democratic*

Some unions are not run in a democratic way. The officials and leaders tell the workers what to do without consulting them. Sometimes the leadership is working together with the bosses. In Asia they call these unions 'yellow' unions. Even inside progressive unions we find that workers may not be controlling the union. Undemocratic unions crush the participation of all workers, but it is women who are most left out.

'Union? I want to join the union, but I can't. You see, after work, I have to run home to cook, wash the clothes of my family, take care of the kids. If I go home late, I feel guilty.'

– *A Korean worker*



Demands from her husband and children often block a woman's involvement in her trade union.



A meeting of Brazilian women. In some countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, women workers have set up separate women's trade unions or organisations.

● *Men in the union undermine and ignore women*

'Men union reps tend to ignore the women's problems, even though these may affect their work', says Alicia from Nicaragua. A shopsteward in Britain says: 'My husband is in the union but he hates me being active. He calls me shop-stupid.' At a workshop, Asian women unionists agreed:

'Issues that affect women most and men less are given the lowest priority in the process of collective bargaining. Sometimes these same issues may be given up on the negotiating table as concessions on the side of the workers.'

Women workers also face sexual harassment from men in the unions.

● *Lack of confidence of women*

As a result of their upbringing, as well as how they are treated inside the union, many women do not feel confident to participate very actively. Isabel from Uruguay says:

'There are things you want to say but don't because you think they'll laugh at you. Women aren't trained to speak in public or to give reports to men. You don't feel confident because you haven't got the experience they've got. Women have been educated to be passive and not answer back.'

☛ *What are the problems women face inside your trade union?*



How to build women workers' strength?

All over the world, women workers have found ways of organising to address the problems they face in trade unions. They have found many different ways to organise themselves. But they all started with one important step: women workers got together to discuss their problems and to plan what to do about them.

● *Set up women's structures within the union*

Women workers around the world have set up specific women's structures inside unions to address their problems. These structures include: women's desks, women's committees, gender committees, advisory boards, and equal opportunity commissions. In many cases (Cosatu included) the union has made many progressive resolutions and plans about addressing women's oppression in the union and the workplace. But they are often not implemented. They are not taken seriously by men in the union.

In Cosatu, the male organisers often do not help to set up the women's forums. Also, too little money and resources are given to gender work within the unions.

● *Set up separate organisations for working-class women*

In some countries, women workers have set up separate women's trade unions or organisations. This means that their work cannot be so easily blocked by men in the union. These structures are independent from the mainstream trade union movement, even though they work very closely with them.

In Kenya, there is the Action Committee of Trade Union Women. They are part of the Pan African Women Trade Union Coordinating Committee. Through this committee they network with 41 other African countries.

In the Philippines, there is the Women Workers Movement with over 20 000 members. In Korea, there is the Korean Women Workers Association. There are also women rural worker organisations in Paraguay (Peasant Women's Commission), and in Brazil (Movimento das Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais).

In India there is the Working Women's Forum and the Self Employed Women's Association (see Workers World No.13). There are also the other women-only unions mentioned earlier in this article (unions of domestic workers, housewives, prostitutes).

In South Africa, there have also been women workers' unions – for example, the Federation of Women Workers was formed in 1938.

● *Challenge the resistance to women's structures*

People (usually men) say that separate women's structures divide the working class. The truth is that it is sexism that divides the working class, and women's structures are necessary to overcome sexism. Some argue that women's structures means that women's issues are marginalised. But as Lucy Nyembe of Cosatu says, 'The fact of the matter is that so long as there are not women's structures, women's issues are not addressed at all.'





● *Understand that capitalism and sexism are bound together*

Organising women separately does not mean forgetting about the class struggle. It means having a deeper understanding of the class struggle. The struggle against capitalism and women's oppression are bound together. The Women's Commission of the Brazilian federation of trade unions states:

'The inequalities and problems that women face are a deeper form of the oppression and exploitation that the whole working class faces. So, the unionisation of women is a job for the working class. It does not mean division. It means a strengthening and unifying in the struggle against the bourgeois ruling class.'

It is through the organisations of the working class, and not in the organisations of bourgeois women, that working class women can end their oppression. Working class women need independent structures in which they can feel confident to raise and address their problems. They also need to educate and work with working-class men.

But structures alone will not solve women's problems. Unions need to address gender issues through concrete actions.

● **Challenge and educate men**

Men within the union, and those in the families of women workers, must be challenged and educated. In Brazil, MMTR organises 'spouse weekends' where women can bring their partners. There they do role-plays showing the problems they face at home. They discuss together how to solve these problems.

● **Share domestic work**

In order to involve women effectively in trade unions, personal and domestic issues must be addressed. Men and women must share the responsibilities of childcare and domestic work.

● **Trade union work must allow for domestic responsibilities**

Meetings and activities of members and paid organisers must be organised in a way that allows workers to fulfill domestic responsibilities. In Kenya, the Women's Action Committee plans to set up communal kitchens to reduce the domestic burden and to allow workers to meet while they are cooking. In Malaysia, smaller meetings take place at a worker's house if she (or he) has domestic responsibilities.

Unions need to organise time-off during working hours for meetings. If this is impossible, transport and childcare must be provided. And meetings should be held at times that suit parents.

● **Build worker control**

Workers must control every part of union work. Officials and leaders must follow the decisions of the workers, and not the other way round.

● **Build womens' leadership**

Where there is real worker control, many more women workers will become leaders. Trade unions also need to actively build women's leadership. Some of the ways unions in other countries have done this are: assertiveness and leadership training courses for women, affirmative action, and reserved seats for women in leadership positions.

● **Be creative in your organising methods**

To make sure women workers are fully involved in the union, meetings and organising methods must be participatory, creative and friendly. Women agricultural workers in Nicaragua used 'Popular Education' to organise thousands of women. Marie Khie, a Korean organiser also has success with these methods:

'I used pictures, TV stories, and dramas for discussion. Everyone was encouraged and expressed their opinions. We discussed our own life stories.'

In a Free Trade Zone in Sri Lanka where trade unions are illegal, women workers organise through a newsletter, Da Bindu. In some countries women workers have set up women's centres, education projects and study groups.

● **Take up gender issues in negotiations with bosses**

Trade unions must show their commitment to gender issues through the demands they fight for when negotiating with bosses and madams.

Where there is real worker control, many more women workers will become leaders.

A woman worker leader in Thailand



● *Take up gender issues in the community*

Trade unions need to get involved in campaigns in the community. Bolivian women campaigned against high food prices. In Brazil, women workers fought for a women's police station to deal with cases of rape and battery. Abul Hossain, of the Bangladesh Garment Workers and Employees Federation says,

'As well as wage-exploitation, women face social and familial oppression. We do not only fight for trade union rights. We are also fighting against dowry, violence and all sorts of abuse.'

☛ *What do you think needs to be done to build the strength of women workers in your union?*

☛ *How can we build solidarity with women worker organisations around the world?*

Contact ILRIG if you would like more information about the women worker organisations that we have written about in this article.

USING THIS ARTICLE FOR EDUCATION WORK IN YOUR UNION

You can use this article for education work with women workers, or with men and women workers. You can use Plan A or Plan B, or devise your own plan. Plan B is powerful and lively, and will actively involve workers.

Plan A: Reading and discussion

In a workshop, divide workers into groups of about 5 people each. In each group choose a woman worker to lead the group. Go around in a circle, giving each person a chance to read aloud from the article. When you get to a question written inside a block, stop and talk about answers to the question. Give everyone a chance to say something. Read the whole article in this way.

Plan B: Role plays and discussion

Divide the participants into 4 groups. Each group has 30 minutes to read a section and prepare a play. Then, beginning with group 1, each group has 5 minutes to put on their play, plus 15 minutes for discussion. The workshop should last for one to two hours.

Group 1: Take turns to read aloud Part 1 of the article (page 32). Prepare a play showing the problems that women workers face at work. Put on the play for the rest of the workers. This group must then ask the other workers, 'Do you experience these problems? What other problems do women workers face at work?' Let people talk about these problems.

Group 2: Take turns to read aloud Part 2 of the article (pages 33-35). Prepare a short play showing the difficult sectors women are organised in. Put on the play for the rest of the workers. This group must then ask the other workers, 'What ideas do you have about how to organise women workers in these sectors?' Let people talk about these ideas.

Group 3: Take turns to read aloud Part 3 of the article (pages 35-36). Prepare a short play showing the problems that make it difficult for women workers to be active in the unions. This group must then ask the other workers, 'Do you experience these problems? What other problems do women workers face in the unions?' Let people talk about these problems.

Group 4: Take turns to read aloud Part 4 of the article (pages 37-39). Prepare a short play showing what you can do inside your union to build the strength of women workers. This group must then ask the other workers: 'Do you agree with these ideas? How else can we build the strength of women workers in the union?' Let people talk about these plans.

At the end of the whole workshop, discuss: 'What action must we take now? What further education work must we do? Can we use these plays to educate others?'

WORKERS' WORLD: *What do you think are the main problems that women workers face, at work, at home and in society?*

DM: You cannot separate the problems of women workers from the general problems faced by women. But specifically for women workers there are problems such as equal opportunities, promotion, basic conditions of employment, childcare, maternity leave and health care. If you come to the home, childcare is a big problem. Women with children do face problems at work in relation to time off, etc. We have been able to achieve something from the employers with regard to this issue. Other issues are discrimination and sexual harassment. You know women in certain areas have to give in to certain requests made by supervisors in order for them to get jobs.

WW: *Recently we elected a new democratic government. One of the main tasks of the government is to implement the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). How do you think this programme will benefit women and particularly women workers?*

DM: The RDP speaks about providing jobs, providing houses, providing electricity and water. Also unemployment is a big problem. The majority of the unemployed are women. In the informal sector, the majority are women. Issues like affirmative action needs to be put into place to give priorities in certain areas to women, particularly for single mothers. The RDP is trying to address that.

It must also try to address the issue of childcare. We believe it is the state's responsibility. The previous government made it a private issue. The RDP is saying that it is the state's responsibility to provide adequate and affordable childcare. That will assist women workers in particular.

WW: *Yes that is very important. Now, coming specifically to the organisation of women workers – we know that at the launch of Cosatu in 1985, Cosatu committed itself to making sure that women workers are organised and that the federation would be sensitive to women and gender issues. Also in 1988 we saw the Women's Conference taking place where resolutions were passed and a programme of action formulated. Can you perhaps give us some assessment of the organisation of women workers in Cosatu? Has it been successful?*

DM: The organisation of women within Cosatu has been successful, although very slowly, I must admit. There are reasons why it has been so slow. Resolutions on women have been taken at every congress. But it was only in 1991 where Cosatu agreed to get a co-ordinator for the programme. It was clear that you cannot run a programme successfully, without somebody behind this programme, and monitoring the success or weaknesses of the programme. And I believe that since the 1991 Congress, the programme did pick up a bit.

Yet since 1989 we were able to implement the resolution from the 1989 Congress which officially stated that we should set up committees under the Education Department. But having a sub-structure in another sub-structure created some problems.

INTERVIEW:

Cosatu and women workers

**Dorothy Mokgalo,
outgoing Cosatu Gender
Co-ordinator, speaks about
the experience of
organising women workers**



This was because the Education Department is also a sub-structure and had its own problems or programmes. Our programme would be secondary to whatever they were going to do. This changed and we were able to see most of our regions as well as the affiliates establishing structures. Looking at this, you can see there is progress. People are beginning to understand the importance of having gender or women's committees. For example, it was through the women's committees that we were able to take up the childcare issue.

We were also able to achieve other things, such as maternity rights. If you go to affiliates, this issues is high on their agendas. We've got agreements ranging from three months paid to twelve months paid in certain industries. That is an achievement. We are also

able to start sensitising people around developing women leadership. Last year was the first year that Cosatu elected a woman as a national office bearer, not because they wanted to, but because of the pressure from us. We need to reflect the women membership at a national level. We also hope to increase woman leadership from the regions up to the national level.

WW: What about organising women not in formal industry, like unemployed women and those in the informal sector?

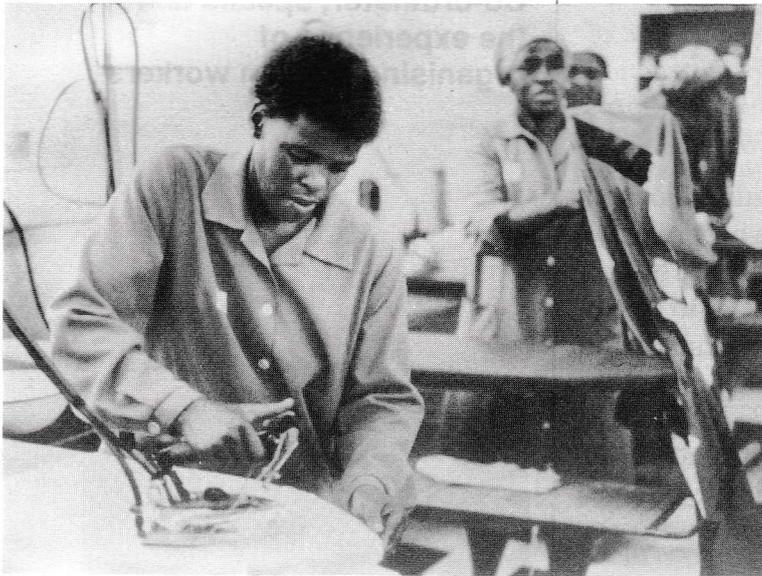
DM: I must say that Cosatu has not organised them. There was a committee of the unemployed, but unemployed women as a sector is not organised by Cosatu. I know that there are people organising women in the informal sector. But this is outside

Cosatu. These are women mainly in Durban and I think they are doing very well.

WW: You said the organisation of women in Cosatu has been quite successful. How is that reflected in the structures, such as the shop-stewards, regional office bearers, and regional executive committees?

DM: An assessment was made in 1993. It was found that 14 – 16% of the shopstewards in Cosatu are women. But that does not mean that this is reflected at a national level. Three women are affiliate representatives at a national level and one or two regions have got women on their regional office bearers structures. We have women occupying other important positions although they are not elected positions. We also need to reflect at all Cosatu conferences women representation, and to force affiliates to make sure that women are included in the delegations.

There has been progress. In the past, the Campaigns Conference would only have men delegates. But this doesn't happen anymore. There is still a problem at the Central Executive level in Cosatu since this consists of either the General Secretary or the President or their assistants of the affiliates. It is only unions like Sadwu (domestic workers' union) and Sactwu (textile union) that have women representation.



WW: Yes because a recent article stated that three out of the seventy on the CEC are women.

DM: Yes three representing the affiliates. This is a reflection of the leadership in the affiliates. We hope that things will change.

WW: I remember that it was at the ANC 1991 conference, where the ANC Women's League proposed the policy of a 30% quota for women on the National Executive Council of the ANC. Has this been discussed within Cosatu?

DM: I think its coming up at the Cosatu Congress. But we've got several affiliates which are opposed and some affiliates are supporting it. I would say that both arguments are valid, but I think we should openly discuss that and request that it should be part of discussions at the congress in September 1994. We will be preparing something for the discussion.

WW: Preparing affiliates before the congress will be important, since that was the main weakness of the discussion at the ANC National Congress. People were not prepared for the discussion. Can you talk to us about the gender or woman's forums? Is there a difference between the two?

DM: I must admit that only the Women's Forum exists in Cosatu. But to explain why we went back to gender forums as opposed to woman's forums. At the 1991 Cosatu Congress a debate was raised on whether we should continue to have separate women only forums. It was clear we could not reach agreement on abolishing women-only committees.

Congress decision was that we should continue to have women's forums, but we should also attempt to build gender forums – forums that include men as well. These gender forums should be set up at regional level and their aim is to build gender awareness particularly amongst the regional leadership. Women's forums should be maintained for the purpose of woman's development and confidence building. However, it seems that it is the woman's forums that are functioning the best. Also at a national level we have the National Women's Committee.

WW: Maybe you can explain to the readers the purpose of separate women or gender forums?

DM: The reason for separate women-only structures is to develop women. We know the problems that women face. The majority of our women lack the confidence to take up their own issues. We believe that these forums should be treated as educational forums, where women are equipped with information.

Another purpose is to look at policies particularly those affecting women and to make recommendations. Without having these forums, there's no place where you could start having these discussions and debates. It has been proved that women's issues are not yet a priority in most of the organisations.



In the National Women's Committee we make sure that we know what issues will be coming up at the Central Executive Committees. If you look at our dates, the National Women's Committee always sits two weeks before the Central Executive Committee. This was done purposefully so that we can look at the agenda of the CEC and make inputs where possible.

WW: And support mechanisms for gender/women's forums such as research?

DM: We do get support. We were able to use CALS Gender Department, and we will be able to use Cosatu's research project. We also have financial support within the Cosatu budget.

WW: If we look at the experience of organising women workers in other countries, such as those in South East Asia, we see that they have strong women worker organisations. In fact in some countries they have established separate women's trade unions. What is your position on this? Do you think that women workers in South Africa can be organised in separate women worker organisations?

DM: Personally, I think it is not necessary. I think that the process of having women's committees, if used effectively, can be successful in organising women workers. Take for example the ANC Women's League (WL). Although the WL is an organisation on its own, it is not totally separate from the ANC and that in itself is its strength. The ANC has the right to intervene on certain issues, but the WL also has the power of influencing certain decisions in the ANC, because they are part and parcel of the ANC. If the WL had been separate, you would not have had the situation where one-third of the national candidate's list of the ANC were women.

Having totally separate women's workers organisation or a separate women worker's movement would imply that it is against the men's movement. Maybe it's working in certain countries.

WW: Do you agree that at times women's organisations can unite for a specific issue, e.g. the National Women's Charter.

DM: Yes. And after having achieved that purpose that alliance should disband and whenever there is a need to unite again, can do so.

WW: We have come to the end of the interview. What advice can you give to women workers that want to form women's committees?

DM: I feel that you don't just start by setting up a structure. You start by bringing women together and hear from them if they want such a structure. This will help women to understand the purpose of setting up the structure. If you impose, you might be the only person who understands the need for it and not have support. The women should also look at the work of the structure and how it will benefit them. This process needs to start from the bottom, at the local level. But it is very important that the women themselves see the need for such a structure. ★

Homeworkers are often called 'the invisible workforce' because they work out of sight, in their own homes. They are usually women and their work is not recognised as 'real work', even though they are part of the industrial production process, working for a boss. Roslyn Perkins tells us about the growth of homeworking in Europe.

All workers and trade unions should worry about the growth of homeworking because it undermines the hard-won successes of the unions for factory and office workers. But we should not attack the homeworkers. We must focus our struggle on the bosses who profit from this invisible workforce.

Homeworking is increasing across Europe and in many parts of the world. Some thought that as industry developed, homeworking would die out. But, no.

More and more employers are using women's work at home as a way to cut costs. They do not have to pay the heating and lighting bills. They do not have to pay for the workers' holidays or time off sick. They profit from the fact that it is much harder for unions to organise workers at home.

Homeworkers make, process, assemble and pack goods in a wide range of industries. They may be doing office work such as typing or telephone sales. Or their jobs may be part of the industrial process: assembling, finishing or packing. Electronics and clothing industries use homeworkers in this way. Even heavy industries such as car-assembly put work out. With the help of new technology, factory-type repetitive work can be done in workers' own homes.

There are no hard statistics because this part of the economy is so invisible and difficult to measure. Surveys in Europe show millions of workers involved in homeworking. In Italy, researchers believe that up to fifteen percent of women's jobs are in homeworking. In Holland, about three percent of all women are involved in homeworking. The percentages vary for each industry, region and local population.

In Britain three-quarters of all homeworkers are women. Also there is a clear picture emerging across Europe that many are women from migrant families. They are women from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean who have settled in Europe. They earn even less than white homeworkers do.

So, homeworking is using gender and racial discrimination to exploit people who find it hard to sell their labour in the open labour market.

HOMEWORKERS: The invisible workforce



A British homemaker speaks

Janet is a typical British homemaker. She lives in the north of the country, in an area of high unemployment. Janet has four children. Her husband works nights and is low waged.

To help pay their housing tax and boost their family income, Janet works for one pound (five rands) an hour glueing textile labels into books. The work has caused her asthma to get worse. Attacks are now monthly and severe. She and her children have also developed skin rashes.

Whether or not there is work dictates Janet's whole life. Children's activities, even birthdays, may be cancelled if work arrives. Often she works all night and over weekends. Other weeks, no work arrives. This causes stress in the family and Janet is exhausted, isolated and angry:

'I want a proper job but there is no hope. I have racked my brains as to what I could do but I cannot afford the childminding. I hate this work. It makes me feel brain-dead and it disrupts my family. But I've got no choice. I don't know what is in the glue or fabrics that causes my skin and body to react, but I cannot ask. They might take the work away and give it to someone else because there will always be someone who will do it. The wage has been the same for the last seven years.'

A captive workforce

Homeworkers are a captive workforce. They are people who cannot easily work outside the home. They may have young children, old parents or a disabled relative to care for. Or they may face other problems such as a husband who does not want them to go out to work. Racial harrassment may be making them too frightened to leave the house for a job.

These problems are used by the bosses. There are almost no overhead costs for the bosses to pay. They do not have to consider welfare or safety issues. They can wash their hands of all responsibility to the workers. It is the ultimate in cost-cutting for the bosses.

Homework is done for an employer or an agent. Homeworkers have little control over production or marketing. Bosses are now using the 'just-in-time' production method. This means that if orders dry up, the work dries up, and the homemaker earns nothing. When orders suddenly come in, the work is put out to the homemaker at very short notice, sometimes even overnight. The worker must remain available at all times, regardless of family or social commitments.

This gives the employers a lot of flexibility. So more and more employers are reducing the number of permanent workers to a minimum and using homeworkers.

Payment rates are low – often half the wage of a worker doing similar work in a factory. From these low wages, the homemaker must pay bills for lighting and electricity, making the real wage even lower. In Britain, homeworkers often fail to get even one pound (or five rands) an hour. So they must work long hours to make ends meet. Homeworkers tend to work longer and more unsocial hours than factory workers.

The need for unions

In Europe, trade unions have traditionally failed to reach homeworkers. Efforts are sporadic but unions tend to see it as a 'no win' situation and soon give up. It is not easy to enter into women workers' homes, especially for men organisers. If organisers only speak European languages, they may not be able to communicate with the workers.

But homeworkers are starting to organise themselves. Grassroots homeworking groups are growing in Europe. In Britain, the National Homeworking Group represents many regional grassroots groups of homeworkers. It has forged links in Europe and further away. It is developing ideas on organising learnt from other groups such as SEWA (the Self-Employed Women's Association) in India. (See WORKERS' WORLD No. 13). Lessons learnt in Europe and elsewhere seem to show the need for self-organisation at the community-level first. Often these initiatives are supported by service NGOs and local government.

An exciting initiative in Holland is the development of a Women's Union. Together with homeworkers groups, the Women's Union is building links to the traditional labour movement.

In Canada, homeworking is found in the Chinese and Vietnamese communities. A coalition of community-based groups and women's groups has built up work with the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union.

Homeworking groups believe that unions should take a long-term view. They must see the need to recruit and organise homeworkers and migrant workers. Employers are looking to cut out the core workforce, keeping as many workers as possible on short-term contracts, piece work and as homeworkers. If they ignore the plight of the marginalised workers, unions will be digging the hole deeper for the factory-based workers to fall in. Homeworking groups in Canada and Europe say that the plight of homeworkers should be seen as an 'early warning system' for other workers. ★

Here in South Africa, homeworkers are beginning to organise themselves. They have recently formed an organisation called the Association for the establishment of a Self-Employed Women's Union (AFSEWU). For more information you can contact them at: AFSEWU, Office 7, City Market Shopping Complex, Warwick Avenue, Durban 4001, or P O Box 48621, Qualbert 4078. Tel: (030) 304 3042 Fax: (031) 304 3719



HOMEWORKERS CHARTER 1985

This charter was drawn up by homeworkers' groups in Britain, supported by the British Trades Union Congress (TUC). The TUC says that unions should include homeworkers in their collective bargaining.

- ★ Homeworkers to get free adequate care for their dependents
- ★ Resources for home workers to meet for mutual support
- ★ Homeworkers to have full employee status
- ★ An end to racist and sexist practices, and the repeal of racist and sexist laws
- ★ A national minimum wage
- ★ Changing health and safety laws to include homeworkers and their families
- ★ Training and education opportunities for home workers.

For more information:
National Homeworking Group,
Peggy Alexander & Jane Tate,
Yorkshire & Humberside Low Pay
Unit, 102 Commercial Street,
Batley WF17 5DP, Britain

Women workers in East Germany

For more than forty years Stalinist East Germany (GDR) was separated from capitalist West Germany. In late 1989, millions of German people took action demanding the reunification of their country. Germany became one country again in October 1990. But how has unification changed the lives of workers, in particular women workers? And how have women and men workers responded to these changes?

In this article, Renate Hurtgen looks at these questions. Renate is a trade union activist from East Berlin.

The economy of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) is hardly recognisable. Gigantic corporations, some of which employed up to a hundred thousand people, have been destroyed. They were seen as competing with West German capital. Some industries have become small and insignificant. These changes have been referred to as 'shock therapy'. In practice it means adjusting the economy of the former GDR to meet the needs of West German capital.

The effects on workers

The most negative experience which workers have of the new system is unemployment. Today Germany has an unemployment rate which is higher than ever before. In December 1993, 15,8 percent of all East Germans had no job. This is the official statistic. In reality there is a shortage of six million jobs!

It is not only eastern workers who get fired by the bosses. West German workers also have to worry about their jobs. The bosses have attacked the standard of living and other achievements which West German workers won through previous struggles. But instead of blaming the bosses, workers blame each other: 'If the east hadn't come, we would be better off', some West German workers say. And 'those in the west should share more with us', some East German workers say.

There are few joint struggles. There is industrial action in the east. In the next week, there is industrial action in the west. There is no co-ordination of this action. In Berlin, for example, workers in the east protested against their dismissals from June to September 1993. In October, the western workers did the same! Although there was a joint union demonstration, it came much too late. So workers must build solidarity. Both sides have to learn that their situation has common causes and a common enemy.

The East German working class is divided

West German capitalism has also divided East German workers into rich and poor to a much greater extent than before. For example, those who earn more wages against those who earn less; those who work against those who are unemployed; and those who can buy a car against those who rely on social welfare.

This means that some workers are better off than others. Surveys have shown that those who have a job – but also some of those who don't – are more content than they were in the GDR. Almost nobody wants the old system back. And many workers' struggles over the last two years were led under the motto: 'We want a rapid privatisation of our firms!'. People expected 'proper work and proper money' from it.

So for some the hope of a better life after reunification has been fulfilled. This partly explains why there is often a lack of solidarity. It explains why resistance against the closure of companies is not carried out all over the country simultaneously but remains a protest of only those who are affected just at that moment. The well known saying, 'hopefully this time it doesn't hit me, but rather my neighbour' paralyses the East German working class too.



The mass action of East Germans against their Stalinist rulers led to big changes. But workers – particularly women workers – have not gained as much as some of them had hoped from unification and capitalism.

The situation of women workers

Economic changes have also shaped the situation of women workers. In the GDR more than 90 percent of the women were employed. Even after reunification, women needed to work. While the cost of living has risen to a western level, an East German worker still earns only 75-80 percent of the wages of a western worker. So women need to contribute their share to the family budget.

But women particularly have been hit by unemployment. At the end of 1993, two thirds of the registered unemployed were women. In those industries which have almost disappeared, this figure is higher. Only in some sectors, like agriculture, railways, post and other services, the unemployment rate of women corresponds more or less with that of men.

Experiencing unemployment is different for men and women:

- Women are less likely to find a new job. This leads to permanent unemployment. So women face a greater threat of poverty.
- Changes in companies push women out of qualified and therefore better-paid jobs. This leads to them giving up their work more easily than their better-paid husbands.
- Unemployed GDR women are highly qualified, though only for jobs which are no longer needed. But only few companies are interested in the retraining of women. They prefer men.

- In the big cities especially, for example in Berlin, many women live alone with their children. Of these women, more than 20 percent are unemployed and another 20% only have irregular employment. As the sole breadwinner, their situation is much worse than before the economic changes.

Who are the losers?

Although women workers have benefited the least 'from the blessings' of the western market economy, many are content with recent changes. These are mostly women who already in the GDR had a badly paid job and few qualifications. Many of them were in industries where out-of-date technologies led to bad working conditions. In the textile industry and in agriculture where payment was the worst, 70 percent of the workers were women!

So it is not surprising that women are happy to get rid of these jobs. And earning less than men is not something new. Women workers had already experienced this in the GDR! Women were the 'losers' then, and today they find themselves being the 'losers' again. When the day of change came, it was mainly the women who were in the worst positions to start the race for the jobs.

Women and men learn to fight together

During the weeks of radical change in 1989, there were many women who were active in the citizens' movements and in the factories. But after West German society took root, most women stopped playing this role. Within a few weeks everything changed: the range of goods for sale in the shops, prices, laws, authorities, the education system and much more. Women particularly needed confidence and time to become familiar with the new situation.

West German women were disappointed by this retreat of the East German women. They believed that given the large number of working women in the GDR, these women would be much more willing to fight. They forgot that going to work does not automatically mean that women are liberated. And they forgot that the workers in the GDR did not win their rights through struggle. Pay rises, holidays and better working conditions were only 'presents' from the government which the trade unions accepted politely.

But former GDR workers have learnt to fight for their demands. In spring 1993, East German steel workers participated in their first strike. The strike was very strong. The union leadership showed 'great surprise at the willingness to fight by our East German colleagues'. Had the leadership of the metal workers' union not called off the strike so soon, it could have become a spark for more industrial action.

Women have become active again in these struggles. For a whole year in Bischofferode, East German potash miners fought against the closure of their pit without any support from their trade union. Women as well as men occupied the mine for several days.

The struggle of Bischofferode shows that workers are learning fast. They are learning that their interests are not the same as the interests of the bosses. In East Germany, workers are beginning to stand up as a class. They are slowly becoming more confident to take forward the workers' struggle. This is encouraging! ★

The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), the labour federation of Namibia, played an active role in the liberation struggle of the country. Great militancy was demonstrated by the Namibian workers inside the country while their comrades were involved in the armed struggle outside. The Namibians were confident that they were capable of destroying exploitation and oppression. In this struggle unity was important. Today, NUNW (which consists of seven trade union affiliates) is actively organising women workers into the confederation.

In September, 1992 we held a consultative workshop to plan how to get the women's desk working. The Women's Desk department has been created to:

- co-ordinate women's issues
- educate and encourage women to know their rights at the workplace
- help integrate women workers into the trade union movement and increase their participation
- run literacy classes for both women and men with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education
- co-ordinate women programmes with other women organisations
- to encourage and motivate women to participate in trade union activities
- to create gender awareness amongst working women in the regions. The Women's Desk is also involved in the organisation and training of farm workers.

The main aim of the activities was to set up women's committees in every region. At this very moment we have set up women's committees in twelve different towns.

The activities of the Women's Desk include:

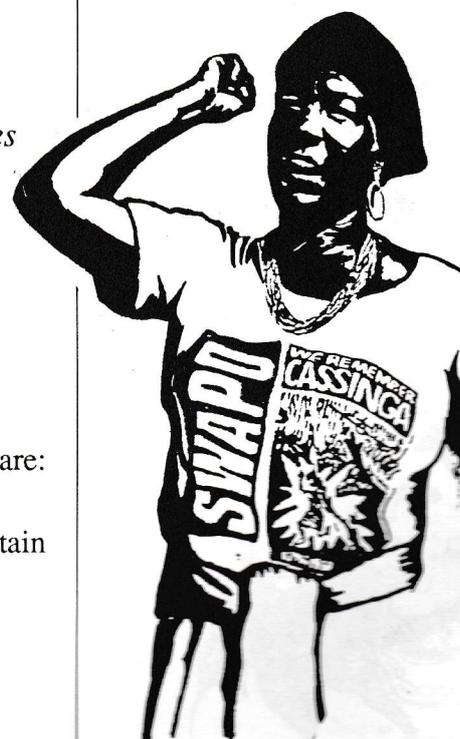
- The production of two handbooks –
 - a) *Women workers and the trade unions*
 - b) *Interim guidelines for regional/local women's committees*
- Basic trade union education
- Education and training skills
- Leadership training
- Education on women workers and the law
- Economic workshop
- Education on the new Labour Act

Some problems that we encounter in organising women workers are:

- lack of support from our menfolk
- lack of education of those who have been elected to certain committees
- problems of accountability
- lack of unity
- lack of finance ★

Women workers in Namibia

Here is a letter from the National Union of Namibian Workers telling us of their experience in setting up a Women's Desk.





Solidarity letters

When ILRIG started to work on this publication, we wrote to many women and worker organisations asking them for information about the struggles of women workers in their countries. Here are extracts from three of the letters we received.

Working Women's Forum in India

I am glad to see about the project of working-class women in South Africa and the setting up of gender committees within the trade union structures. While it is one of the best ways to sensitise the male dominated trade union system on gender issues, it is also equally necessary to have women's own organisations.

In India women are 89% of the total working class among the informal sector group. Therefore, it is very necessary for women to set up their own organisations at the start. But later, setting up gender committees within the trade unions, as you do now, is the most appropriate action. It is not good to divide the working class, as it will tone down the pace of their struggle.

Bangladesh Garments Workers' and Employees' Federation

The Bangladesh Garment Workers and Employees Federation is a trade union organisation, absolutely dominated by women workers. As a result women issues are predominant. Women are facing wage exploitation, social and family oppression and discrimination. Besides their trade union rights, we are also fighting against dowry, violence and all sorts of abuse

Movimento dos Trabalhadores rurais sem Terra (MST) – Brazil

Our movement is a mass movement and we are part of CUT (the trade union federation in Brazil). We know that rural working women carry a double burden in relation to men. They work the land and are also responsible for housework and the children's upbringing.

The women who take part in the struggle of the MST are fighters on two fronts, since they uphold the participation and motivation for the whole family and take an active part in all the movement's activities. Many of these women have become important leaders in the movement.

The MST encourages women to take part in all the decision-making levels of the movement. And it encourages them to participate in worker or women's organisations.



Women and Trade Unions Project

This edition of WORKERS' WORLD forms part of ILRIG's Women and Trade Unions Project. This project looks at issues facing women workers both in South Africa and internationally. The project works with all progressive trade unions and community organisations. The work of the project is to:

- run education workshops;
- do research;
- write articles;
- facilitate building solidarity between women workers internationally;
- assist trade unions in setting up gender/women's forums;
- assist trade unions in producing education materials for women workers; and
- ensure the integration of gender issues into ILRIG's education work.

Here are some of the education programmes which we run:

- How to set up a gender/women's forum in your union.
- Women workers and the new democratic government.
- Women workers and the Reconstruction and Development Programme.
- Collective bargaining issues and how they relate to women workers' demands.
- Women and health issues.
- Women and the law.
- Women workers and the world economy.
- Women workers and the South African economy.
- Organising women workers internationally.

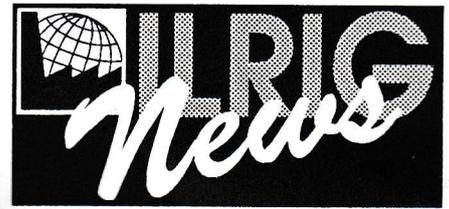
These workshops are done by planning together with organisations. The main aim of this work is to strengthen the voice of women workers. If any person or organisation is interested in these programmes, they can contact Althea MacQuene at ILRIG.

Workshop pack: a look at the ICFTU

In preparation for Cosatu's Congress in September, many affiliates are debating the question of Cosatu's relationship to international trade union organisations, in particular the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

ILRIG has prepared a workshop pack which can be used by education officers and shopstewards to facilitate discussion. This pack gives information on the history of the ICFTU and its policy on issues like structural adjustment and multinationals. The pack looks at both the strengths and weaknesses of the ICFTU. We have included inputs, short readings and questions for discussion.

The pack is available for R10 from ILRIG.



**Forward
with the
struggle!**

**National
Women's Day
9 August**



**NOW YOU HAVE TOUCHED
THE WOMEN YOU HAVE
STRUCK A ROCK: YOU HAVE
DISLODGED A BOULDER;
YOU WILL BE CRUSHED.**

Questionnaire

ILRIG would like to know if you found this publication useful. Please answer the questions below and send this form to ILRIG, P O Box 213, Salt River 7924

1. Did you find this publication useful?
2. Why?
.....
.....
3. Which section did you find the most useful?
4. Were you able to use the information in the work of your organisation?
5. How?
.....
.....
6. Are there other issues which we should have addressed?
7. Do you want more information? What about?
8. Name
 Organisation
 Address
 Tel: Fax