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International Womens Day 2008

USA - Ninety nine years since first women's day

Fundamental problems of yesterday remain today.

Four contributions from members of Socialist Alternative

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The first women's day celebration in the United States in 1909 was a demonstration by working women and their supporters for better wages, shorter working hours, better working conditions and the right to vote.

Tina Rua, Socialist Alternative

Despite many social and political improvements for working women in the 20th century, the fundamental problems of yesterday are still the fundamental problems of today. The articles below highlight the continued struggle of working-class women for equal pay, better working conditions, protection against physical harm, and better living standards for all people.

Wages are one of the biggest concerns for all workers under capitalism. They need to pay for rent, food, heat, transportation, childcare, care of the elderly and many other needs. Currently, on average, women in the United States make less money than men, which means they have less economic and social power in society. One of the articles below stresses how low wages, coupled with other factors, create a desperate economic situation for many working-class women.

Women also face sexual harassment in their workplaces, which creates a climate of fear amongst them. This has negative repercussions for all workers. It hinders women's ability to organize and fight against all forms of oppression at work, in the home and in greater society. As was the case with the New York Knicks professional basketball team (see article below), sexual harassment is pervasive in capitalist society, even among the ruling class. But as socialists have seen, working-class women need to go outside the capitalist legal system and build mass movements and mass actions that are inclusive of all workers.

This is why the example of the California Nurses Association, covered in another of the articles below is important for all workers. The CNA is a militant union whose fighting tactics and demands, such as organizing the unorganized and rejection of two-tier contracts, have won them victory after victory. Nonetheless, it is

important that the CNA takes even bolder steps. Running its own (independent) candidates will give the CNA a better taste of the economic and political situation of a wider number of workers and possibly encourage other unions to take up similar militant tactics.

While working-class women need to fight against low wages, two-tier contracts and sexual harassment by unionizing and building mass movements, we must understand that, under capitalism, any victories will constantly be under attack by the ruling class. A good example of this in the United States is the right to abortion. Only a socialist society, based on democratic workers' control and management of the economy, can succeed in eliminating wealth inequities, discrimination, sexual harassment, and the many other problems that working-class women face today.

Discrimination against women at work and in society

Equal pay must become a reality!

Dani Indovino, Socialist Alternative

Women in the United States face a complex economic reality. Sex discrimination, while often declared dead by media and lawmakers alike, has persisted over time. One of the starkest illustrations of this discrimination is economical. Foremost, the wage gap, or difference between men's and women's wages in America, has not closed significantly in over twenty years. Women are more likely to be poor in the US than men as well as to need the now dwindling social support. Three-quarters of poverty in the US is concentrated in women and their children. This number is not shrinking, but growing, particularly among women who are single - unmarried, lone parents, widows or displaced homemakers.

There is not just one reason for the poverty rates among American women, but a complex web of cultural and economic issues that form the climate for this increased poverty. The capitalist market economy is structured around the sexist idea of specialization,

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meaning that women are expected to take care of domestic tasks at the expense of their economic worth. Even women who decide to enter the labor force and earn a wage, whether by choice or necessity, suffer the implications. Work associated with women is often devalued, and professions that are 'women's work,' such as health care, child care, and other service jobs are often valued less in the market than traditional 'men's work,' such as manufacturing, production and the traditional professions.

Now that the US economy is suffering a large drop in these 'men's' jobs and a large increase in 'women's work,' all low-income people are seeing the effects of the devaluing of some of the most important work in any society such as caring for our sick, young and elderly.

A central aspect of the feminization of poverty is the wage gap. On average, in America, women make 76% of a man's wage. Another way to think of this is that American women make about 76 cents to a man's \$1. This statistic is based only on comparing all women with all men, and therefore probably even underestimates the difference.

The conception that women are dependents is a major factor in the way poverty affects them. It contributes strongly to the wage gap as well as the lack of social services for women who are not 'attached' to a man. The fact that men are expected to bring home a family wage that supports an entire family fosters the idea in the labor market that women's earnings are only supplemental. For a long time, the predominant social message, as well as economic one, has been that women belong in a family with a man at the forefront and, taken to its extreme, it means that other choices they may make should be 'punished' in some way!

Although women have undoubtedly become more independent in most industrialized societies, capitalism still prefers to have working class women being seen as wards of men, not trained to be breadwinners and more easily forced into low wage temporary positions. They are more likely to be nurses, teachers, and middle management than men. More men make it to become doctors, lawyers and CEOs. In the managerial or professional class of jobs, women only make up 10% of the top tier of earners. Men, however, make up the other 90%. This is explained in part by the difference in job-tracking and number of years at work.

For lower income jobs, the wage differentiation is even starker. Men are much more likely to be in the manufacturing and manual labor sector than women who are often concentrated in the service sector. Jobs such as construction, plumbing, manufacturing and trucking are generally better paid than childcare, home health assistants and administrative jobs.

Women, therefore, are focused in these lower valued and lower paid jobs. These jobs are less stable, less mobile and have undesirable work conditions. Studies show that 80% of people who start in these lower classes of jobs will never move to the higher paid more stable white-collar or even just higher paid blue-collar jobs.

Also, women in the same job class as men are making less than their male counterparts. Because of the gendered division of labor, women often are often forced to leave the labor force because of a lack of care work. This means that they are either expected to leave the labor force, or have more stress and have to do more work than their male counterparts in the work force. Care work is not only just childrearing, but also the care of sick elders, disabled family members, their own sickness and the sickness of their spouse.

This problem feeds on itself, though. As women are paid less than men, because theirs are seen as secondary incomes, they are more likely to take on part-time work or leave the labor force. Then, when it comes time for someone to care of a child or sick family member, the family has the economic incentive to preserve the man's wage, as it is higher. It is a myth that most women choose freely to leave the labor market because they want to care for children and family. The 'choice' is more often than not economically driven.

Differences in pay while they affect the family immediately, also affect women in the long term. Over women's lifetimes, even a small difference in wages at any one time can mean a huge differential in lifetime wage earning. Not only does this impact on the family as a whole, it also impacts women individually. Divorce, which is at about 50% in America, is a huge factor in this. A woman who has taken time off for childrearing will make less than her male partner who has not. After a divorce, she is able to make less money and therefore is at great risk of poverty. Also, the American Social Security system is based on the amount of the number of years worked and how much wages were during those years. This means that women, who live longer than men, are likely to have lower social security payouts later in life.

Unmarried or single childbearing is also a large predictor of poverty in the United States. There is no system of affordable child care, and many women who have children out of wedlock end up in unstable service jobs. An additional problem for black women in America is the disproportionately high incarceration rate of black men. They make up 13% of the population, but 30% of people arrested, 41% of people on remand and 49% of people in prison. Many of the men that could be contributing parents to these single mother families are in jail and therefore unable to

earn. Once they are free, there are large obstacles to finding housing, employment and applying for social support services.

Social support services, even, are divided into two sectors. The top tier or well-funded services such as Medicare, social security and unemployment benefit have historically been created for and used by men. Social services created for women such as welfare and childcare are often underfunded and stigmatized. Welfare, for instance, was created out of a 19th century widows' pension program and now is misrepresented as being a program for black women.

To receive benefits a person must abide by many regulations and restrictions that are not only paternalistic and obtrusive but also limited as to who can benefit. For example, a person on welfare needs to participate in 35 hours of work participation a week. Though they get childcare rebates and vouchers, they are not assisted in finding affordable childcare. Educational activities, such as homework, are only counted when they are done in a supervised study hall. This is almost impossible for a single mother with children to achieve.

The housing crisis is another aspect of how women's poverty is worsening in the United States. Right now, women are 32% more likely to get a subprime loan than a man and these loans are ten times more likely to foreclose than prime loans. Women have always had barriers to prime loans, and with this new crisis it appears that predatory lenders are actually targeting both women and people of color. The rate of homeownership for women is just 30% compared to 68% for all Americans. The interest rates they have been offered raise exponentially over time, and these populations are at a much greater risk of foreclosure. Homeownership is one of the main sources for borrowing, and not only are women losing this wealth base, they are also at risk of homelessness and further poverty. Homelessness is a barrier to stable work as well as a huge detriment for children. Many women are looking to be plunged into deeper poverty and sent into a rental market that is squeezed and has rising rental rates

Of course these are not all the causes and manifestations of women's poverty in the United States. It is just one snapshot of how past and present discrimination and inequalities affect one part of the working class. The divisions in race and gender that are formed over wage issues, access issues and "deserving" and "undeserving" poor are used as a wedge to divide the working class as a whole and impede movements that could not only help women, but the whole of working people.

The subordination of women has been a social reality stemming from economic exploitation. In the past two hundred years alone, women's confinement to the

home and the expectations that they would do all the care work have been ways to keep the rearing of a new working class in private hands. If families have to absorb the cost of raising their children and caring for their elders, the government does not have to collect money for those services from the ruling classes. In addition, it tempers activism among men, as they are less likely to stand up to their bosses, unionize or demand fair working conditions if their being fired would put their family in destitution

The only way historically to change this has been through trade union organisation and industrial struggle as well as through the building of political organisations of the working class. For women to achieve equality in the work place, economically and politically is for the working class- women and men- to organize and fight back.

It would be a direct hit to the pocketbooks of the ruling class if they were serious about gender equality beyond reproductive rights. A strong movement that focuses on unionizing the service sector workforce and the traditional women's work is a first step in ending the gendered disadvantage to that work. It also would help bring men and women together in union halls and on the street to understand that their plights are not entirely different. What is needed is a break from the two parties of capitalism and for an independent pro-worker, pro-women political challenge to be built. It needs to be a springboard of a movement that unites all of the working class regardless of gender and race as well as youth and progressive activists that will stand for a working class program of gender equality. While the ruling class system of capitalism remains, we cannot be guaranteed that our efforts will be successful in the area of women's rights and we need to build a new democratic, socialist society.

Sexual harrassment cannot be defeated only by court action

Working women must organize in unions for a fight-back

Melissa Sanders, Socialist Alternative

In October 2007, Anucha Browne Sanders won her sexual harassment case against Madison Square Gardens and was awarded \$11.6 million. The verdict was the result of a grueling trial, where Browne Sanders, high profile up-and-coming sports executive for the New York Knicks, recounted witnessing male executives pressure young female interns into sex. When she approached her boss and colleagues about the improprieties, she was met with slander, threats, and was subjected to profanity-laced tirades and sexual slurs at the hands of Thomas, the team's

coach. The judge and jury ruled in favor of Browne Sanders, ruling that the actions of Thomas and the other men had turned Madison Square Gardens into a hostile workplace.

Browne Sanders' case shows that sexual harassment is an extremely pervasive phenomenon. It is easy to assume that such behavior only occurs in situations where women are in virtually powerless subordinate positions. However, all women workers are facing this problem if even corporate executives like her are harassed. Many instances of sexual harassment go unreported because the victims fear the retaliation of the men who harass them – letting the harassment remain invisible. However, breaking the silence enables change. In Browne Sanders' case, two more women at Madison Square Gardens filed similar suits during her trial, showing that she was likely the rule and not the exception.

In our society, women's work is consistently devalued – the glass ceiling, low wages associated with so-called pink-collar jobs, and expectation that women will provide massive amounts of free labor in the form of child rearing and domestic duties, are all examples. Essentially, capitalist society reduces the value of women down to their special role in society: we are often given the message that women are primarily reproductive entities, overly emotional and unfit for serious qualified work. When the devaluation of women's labor is combined with being viewed as sexualized objects, it is easy to see that sexual harassment is a clear manifestation of deeper social problems.

But women do not face such problems alone. The oppression of women is tied to racial and class-based oppression, as well. One of the women working at Madison Square Gardens who filed a lawsuit after Browne Sanders said that the reason she and others were passed over for promotions was “because we're women and we're black” – citing both racist and sexist forms of harassment at once.

We need to remember that high profile cases like this one – which involved a major sports team and an influential female executive – remind us of how pervasive sexual harassment is but do little to solve the problem. The best defense against sexual harassment for working women is to unionize, and demand that their union fights on this issue and to end all forms of injustice in the workplace.. Court cases are not enough to win the rights of women and minorities – we need to build mass movements that cut across race, gender, and class lines to overturn the entrenched inequities throughout capitalist society.

Fighting for Nurses and Patients

CNA shows what can be won through struggle

Marty Harrison, CNA member

The California Nurses Association (CNA) represents 80,000 registered and advance practice nurses at more than 170 public and private facilities in California.

After breaking with the management-dominated American Nurses Association in 1996, the CNA turned its full attention, strength and budget toward the concerns of the direct care nurse organizing the unorganized, bargaining strong contracts and getting politically active.

The CNA has bargained over contract language, banning mandatory overtime and unsafe floating, increasing wages sometimes more than 25% over the life of the contract and addressing patient care issues. It has bargained master contracts at the not-for-profit behemoth, Kaiser Permanente, ending two-tier wages and conditions for nurses of the Central Valley and won neutrality agreements with the for-profit pioneer Tenet.

The nurses of the CNA didn't ask nice or wave their magic nurse wands to win these gains; they organized lots of nurses and used fighting tactics. No union in any state has organized so many nurses in so many health systems: 14,000 nurses at 70 Kaiser Permanente facilities; 5,000 at 13 Sutter Health hospitals; 3,500 at nine Catholic Healthcare West hospitals and 10,000 nurses at University of California facilities.

There is power in numbers and the CNA knows how to exercise this power effectively. Nurses at 13 Sutter Health hospitals struck for two days in October in support of their bargaining committee's demands. Hundreds of nurses bargaining a first contract at Fremont-Rideout Health Group struck simultaneously, applying pressure on their employer they never could have generated alone.

The CNA has taken an independent position on the health care industry, siding decisively with patients and rejecting both the employers' cries of poverty to justify cuts and the insurance companies' rationale for their very existence. On its Guaranteed Health Care website (www.guaranteedhealthcare.org), you can sign the Cheney Care petition, tell your own insurance company horror story, read stories by other patients, write to your representative or newspaper, buy a DVD of “Sicko” and sign up to receive “action alerts”.

Well-designed, agitational public and patient education campaigns like these and others have helped forge this partnership with patients.

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The CNA's legislative victories are unmatched: state-wide nurse to patient ratios (then fending off Governor Schwarzenegger's attempt to repeal ratios), whistle blower protection for health care workers exposing unsafe conditions and funding for nursing education. They are currently working on universal health care legislation (SB 840 and SB 1014) which would establish and pay for a Medicare type plan for all Californians.

Through its National Nurses Organizing Committee (NNOC), the CNA reaches beyond the limits of state borders to organize unorganized nurses like the 500 RN's at St. Mary's in Reno, NV who voted by a 64% margin to join in December 2007. Nurse unions, like the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP) which represents 5,000 health care professionals in Pennsylvania, can affiliate to the NNOC and thereby, to the AFL-CIO. Nurses in Arizona, Illinois, Maine, Ohio and Texas have done the same, rejecting the dead-end of business unionism.

To date, the CNA has not endorsed any democratic candidate for president. On the contrary, it has publicly voiced its opposition to the front runners' insurance-for-all plans as a handout to the insurance companies and a rip-off for patients.

To win universal health care, to defend its members from the decisions of the viciously anti-labor Bush NRLB, to maintain and broaden its coalition with patients, the CNA will have to leap into the ring of independent political action, running its own candidates with its own policies and politics. The sooner, the better.