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Interviews for Resistance: Women Across the Globe Are Planning to Strike on March 8. Here's Why

Wednesday 28 February 2018, by [ARRUZZA Cinzia](#), [BHATTACHARYA Tithi](#), [JAFFE Sarah](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2018).

Welcome to Interviews for Resistance. We're now into the second year of the Trump administration, and the last year has been filled with ups and downs, important victories, successful holding campaigns, and painful defeats. We've learned a lot, but there is always more to learn, more to be done. In this now-weekly series, we talk with organizers, agitators, and educators, not only about how to resist, but how to build a better world.

Cinzia Arruzza: I am Cinzia Arruzza. I am one of the national organizers of the International Women's Strike.

Tithi Bhattacharya: This is Tithi Bhattacharya. I teach at Purdue University. I was one of the national organizers for the International Women's Strike last year and I am doing the same this year.

Sarah Jaffe: Let's start off talking a little bit about this year's strike. What is being planned and why did you decide to do it again this year?

TB: I think everybody knows the context of last year's strike, which started with an extraordinary level of international coordination between feminists globally. This year, those contexts remain and, in the case of the United States, have been enhanced in a way with Trump's election. It was a natural conclusion that it would be repeated this year both internationally, as well as in the United States.

CA: On November 25th, there was also an international day against gender violence. Not in the United States, unfortunately, but around the world we had some very massive demonstrations. The success of this day of mobilization also gave the impulse to think that it was possible to organize another strike this year.

SJ: Let's talk about the history of women's strikes, because this is something that has been around for several decades in the women's movement, but is coming back right now.

CA: Women's strikes are not entirely a novelty. The precedent of the women's strike was in the 1970s, the Women's Strike in Iceland for equal wages. Two years ago, the Polish feminist movement decided to retrieve this form of struggle and to organize a women's strike in Poland against the country's abortion ban. The same happened in 2016 in Argentina with waves of the women's strikes and mobilizations against gender violence.

Starting from there, and especially given the enormous success of these mobilizations and strikes in Argentina and Poland, there was the idea of trying to organize an International Women's Strike on March 8th. Women's strikes are a very powerful way of mobilizing for the feminist movement because

they make apparent not just the victimization of women, but also the power that women have in so far as they are workers who work both in the formal labor market, but also in the social reproductive sphere, at home, and so on. This labor is very often not recognized or valued as it should be.

TB: Even last year when this was declared, there was some pushback over the word “strike” because the understanding of the word “strike” as it has come to be accepted is work stoppage at the point of production. That is a very important and powerful definition of “strike.” However, the word “strike” has several other historical applications, some of which Cinzia just went through.

I think one of the things that we found it very easy to talk about in the context of last year, as well as this year, is the difference between a workplace strike and a political strike. I think the Women’s Strike was a very important contribution to the legacy of a political strike because in the context of the neoliberal decline of union density globally, because of the active attack on unions since the 1970s by the global ruling elite, I think working-class people have significantly lost the most powerful weapon to strike within the workplace, which is unions.

I think, in that context, a political strike is very important because what happened on March 8th last year, just in the United States, was called a strike. We were very dedicated to maintaining that identification of that word, but what happened as a result was that there was intense political discussion about the relationship between workplace and non-workplace kinds of mobilization.

We strongly believe that in a period where there is a loss of power to take action in the workplace, the political strike is a useful way to restart that conversation and perhaps flow back that power into workplace mobilization.

SJ: We have seen the revival of interest in the idea of the political strike, especially in the United States since Trump was elected. It is interesting in this moment that we are seeing a revival of the idea of the political strike even as unions, particularly in this country, but globally, as well, are struggling.

CA: In a sense, this marks the fact that workers are deprived of one of the most crucial means of struggle and protest that is usually recognized in other liberal democracies. I am not even speaking about insurrectionary forms or struggle. Political strikes do take place in a number of countries. They are legal, they are recognized, and they are a very powerful tool whenever the government seems to be impossible to challenge or to influence in another way.

I do hope that the appeal political strikes are having in this moment can actually re-open political conversation and a political campaign to reform labor laws and to really rethink in a very deep way what labor rights should look like in the United States. Because the United States has the most anti-democratic labor laws among liberal democracies. It is really a very exceptional situation.

TB: In terms of the political strike there are two things that are really important. One of the important things to remember, when questions of women’s labor is paramount, is the reason people strike is because of the poor conditions of their life. It’s not necessarily that they strike because of their job. It is because their job is a means to live their life and when conditions of life are deteriorating, that is when people consider doing something about it in their workplace.

This relationship between life and work is often forgotten by union bureaucracies. Union bureaucracies like to treat the union as another kind of a salaried little space where job struggles are negotiated as simply contract negotiations. But, for working class people, it is not about the contract negotiation—it is about their lives and lived conditions.

A political strike gives a wider, deeper context to the meaning of struggle and the gains to be had from struggle and solidarity. I think, particularly in this context, political strikes play that vital role of reminding people between lived conditions of workers and work conditions and how they are both connected and actually necessary to be connected.

SJ: This strike is coming in the midst of the #MeToo movement. Talk about this context where there is this renewed conversation about sexual harassment and sexual violence and how that is playing into this year's strike and organizing.

CA: I think that we should also see a connection between the wave of feminist mobilizations around the world in the past year and a half and then the explosion of the #MeToo campaign.

The #MeToo moment has been a very important moment in the United States and also internationally because it has made apparent what a lot of women already knew, which is that sexual harassment and violence are part of the everyday life of the majority of women, either in the workplace or at home or in the streets. Clearly, gender violence does require a collective response. So, from this viewpoint, the Women's Strike is not so much an alternative to #MeToo. It is rather one contribution or one attempt to try to give a collective response to the isolation that victimization produces.

The idea is that the step forward after #MeToo, after denouncing individually all the harassment and violence that we have suffered throughout our life, there must be, also, the moment of collective organizing and collective response. Otherwise, the structural conditions that enable this gender violence to continue are not challenged. One of the risks of the current attention on the issues of gender violence is that we will get rid of a few obnoxious harassers, some famous and some less famous, and this is all good, of course. I welcome this moment of catharsis, in a sense. But this is not going to solve any problem.

The real problem is not individual nasty men. The real problems are the structural conditions that create the conditions and the impunity for gender violence and sexual violence. We have learned in the past months to what extent women are harassed and abused as women in the workplace, but this clearly has to do with the hierarchical nature of labor relations within the workplace, with the lack of power that the workers have.

Also, from this viewpoint, the lack of unionization, the lack of labor rights in the United States clearly create further conditions for gender violence because women are going to be constantly afraid to speak up against their views of a colleague or of an employer, precisely because they don't feel they have any kind of protection. They don't feel that they have any kind of organizing, collective infrastructure that can actually protect their interests.

TB: I am just going to add actually three very specific things to the #MeToo moment that I think March 8th is concerned with. This is the beginning of why we addressed #MeToo in our organizing. The first is: When last do you remember seeing discussions of work conditions in The New York Times repeatedly? That is what #MeToo has done. We have never seen so many articles in major media outlets about working conditions of women. Yes, it has been mostly about sexual violence, but it has actually exposed how dictatorial and brutal the workplace is for most women, but also for most people. This is a tremendous discussion. I have not seen discussions of working conditions to this extent. This is a very welcome development that for the first time in many years we are seeing questions being raised about what it means to be a worker in this country.

The second is a realization that was limited first to socialists and radicals in this country, but has now begun to become common sense. That is that we all know that since the early part of the 20th

century, there has been an undoubtedly marked increase in women's rights and women's participation in the public sphere and the sphere of work. We have, in a way, through struggles, improved our lives as women.

But, on a parallel track, I think what has happened is the rights of workers have declined precipitously, particularly since the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of neoliberalism. Now we have a contradictory situation where our rights as women have improved over the years, in a certain sense, but the rights of workers as a whole have declined. Which means, that in workplace situations women, particularly, are vulnerable.

The solution that capitalism has offered us is "Because you can improve as a woman, then it is every woman for herself." The solution offered to bad conditions of life and work for women has been, of course, Lean In. That you can improve and you can become a CEO. That is the second kind of development.

The third, which I think is very significant for our purposes, is the fact: How do we then fight back? We all know domestic violence exists to a horrific extent both in the United States and globally, but the advantage of a workplace discussion in this situation is that there are witnesses and there are people who have experienced the same thing because they are your co-workers under the same disgusting rapist boss. There is a collective confidence because you have been through this collective experience and this is why, I think, the voice of the #MeToo campaign is amplified because it comes from a collective place of resistance.

SJ: Tell us about the organizing for this year's strike. What is planned where so far and about the international solidarity work going on, as well?

TB: Internationally, I have been on a few phone calls with the international organizing and it is actually going really well in various parts of the world, notably Italy, Spain, Poland, Argentina, and various other places in Latin America. In the UK, where I was last month, the core organizing center is called The Women's Strike Assembly and they are doing fabulous work in linking up March 8th with the ongoing discussions and organizing for university-wide strike of faculty that is coming up. They are making contacts with faculty members across the UK to coordinate strike action and the organizers in the UK are tireless in going to various strike meetings, etc.

In the United States the plan is that across the country, on March 8th we will stop work for one hour as women in order to show the bosses and their backers in the White House that because we produce the wealth in society, we can also stop producing that wealth and stop society from running. It is a symbolic reminder of our power as women and workers. We are working with various unions to make that happen.

CA: We have reactivated a form of national planning committee that is basically a network of various activists across the country who are volunteering their time and their work for this strike. We had, in New York, a public launch of the Women's Strike with a wonderful panel that was featuring some really incredible speakers.

In this sense, this event, for example, gave a sense of the kind of energy, but also the kind of women that the women's strike is trying to organize, especially working-class women, minority women who are not just participating in the strike, but also waging a lot of struggles and fights in the workplace, against ICE, and so on and sometimes actually winning something and showing in this way that collective action actually does get the goods sometimes.

We think we will have demonstrations and marches and walkouts in most of the biggest cities in the

States. Organizers are already working on the strike in LA, in the Bay Area, in Portland, in Philly. We are also receiving a lot of contacts, emails, messages from people who are interested, who read, for example, the article we published in The Guardian calling for a strike in the United States this year and who are interested in getting on board.

This is an entirely voluntary effort that is really based on grassroots organizations. It is self-funded. People are volunteering their time and their work, but in a sense, this is also the beauty of it, in the sense that around the organization of the strike, we are somehow consolidating an area of anticapitalist feminism that is offering an alternative to the kind of corporate and Lean In feminism that has been dominating in past years. I think there is the political space and desire for this, at least judging from the response that a lot of feminist activists around the country are giving to the idea of organizing on the strike and the enthusiasm that they are putting into this project.

Of course, those who want to get on board can contact us through the website or the Facebook page and organize a strike in their city.

Sarah Jaffe

P.S.

* FEB 9, 2018, 5:16 PM. :

<http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/20900/international-womens-strike-march-8>

* Sarah Jaffe is a former staff writer at In These Times and author of *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt*, which Robin D.G. Kelley called "The most compelling social and political portrait of our age." You can follow her on Twitter @sarahjaffe.

Interviews for Resistance is a project of Sarah Jaffe, with assistance from Laura Feuillebois and support from the Nation Institute. It is also available as a podcast on iTunes. Not to be reprinted without permission.