

international
VIEWPOINT

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Russia :
The Velvet coup ?

India :
The politics of hate

DOSSIER :

World Economy (1)



MARCH 8TH

International Women's Day actions are often considered a ritual. But this year two themes in particular provoked some broad and sizeable demonstrations.

Solidarity with women in former Yugoslavia and opposition to the use of sexual violence and rape as war weapons was a focus for demonstrations in France, the Netherlands, Britain and the United States among others. In some cases mixed demonstrations where the women's call was supported by a number of political and trade-union organizations gathered several thousand people. Elsewhere women's groups organized women-only vigils and demonstrations.

Attacks on women's social gains in those countries where the economic crisis is beginning to hit hard also provoked a militant and sizeable response. In Italy, tens of thousands of women responded to the joint call of the trade unions in Rome to demonstrate in defence of working conditions on Saturday March 6. The demonstrators also took up slogans defending the law on abortion which had not been part of the unions' platform and had provoked criticism from sections of the women's movement.

Russia: empty pots

The mainstream press gave a lot of coverage to "the march of the empty pots" in Moscow, portrayed as a women's march protesting against high prices and lack of supplies in the shops. In reality this was organized by the neo-Stalinists as part of their campaign against Yeltsin, although women's household responsibilities are indeed made much more difficult by the high prices and lack of supplies. Yeltsin himself was addressing a newly-formed association of women entrepreneurs that day.

The day is still a major holiday in Russia, but it has long ago lost its political content. *Pravda* headlined "Congratulations sweet, dear, beloved ones". However, the president of the Union of Russian Women (the former official women's organization) in an interview in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, did spell out the real problems for Russian women who suffer from lower average wages, lower pensions and a greater risk of losing their jobs than men. They make up 75% of the unemployed and the majority of those living below the poverty line. These difficult conditions have also forced women to decide to limit the number of children; the birth rate has dropped by 11% since 1991 and abortions are twice the number of births per thousand women. The rate of congenital diseases among new-born babies has also risen from one in eight to one in six since 1989.



Sweden: a women's revolution?

But one of the countries where the sudden harshness of austerity plans has provoked the biggest response from women is in Sweden where networks of women's groups and researchers had continued to exist without a presence on the national political scene.

"Right to work— stop the cuts! Equal wages now!" When the Swedish finance minister, Anne Wibble, stepped out on to the staircase of the parliament building in Stockholm on March 8, she was surrounded by thousands of angry women including from her own Liberal Party.

An hour earlier, the main square of Stockholm was filled with five thousand women addressed by Lillemor Arvidsson, the leader of the Public Workers' Organization, the main trade union in Sweden with 600,000 members and the only one led by a woman.

"Is it the fault of the women who care for the elderly and sick that the Swedish economy is in crisis?" she asked, before demanding a real shift in the policies of the government, politicians in general and the union leaderships — otherwise women "would make a revolution".

Arvidsson has already made her own personal revolution. A social-democrat throughout her life, she was the only union leader to oppose the wage-freeze and ban on strikes proposed by the social-democratic party three years ago.

She recently left the national party leadership in order to concentrate better on union questions before this year's round of negotiations when the low-waged women of the blue-collar unions will be the bosses' first target.

Women in Sweden had come to believe that no modern bourgeois government — or at least not the union leaderships — would dare to threaten women's rights as women, that the "social-democratization" of Swedish society had forced even the

right-wing party to adopt a new policy on equal rights for women in general.

There would be attacks on women's wages as the lowest-paid workers and through harsh austerity programmes in the public sector where many women work. But our Thatcherist government, together with the "economic experts", and with a lot of help from the media, are now openly questioning women's right to work and women's place in society. Even our liberal and well-functioning abortion law is under threat.

The market economy and fast export production are the ideas of the day: caring, social services, education and bringing up the new generation are worth nothing. The spokesmen of the government dream of the days when "new forms of private services shall rise from the ashes of the public sector like the phoenix".

Faced with this "new world" many women in Sweden are angry. This is why we saw the broadest unity for twenty years around March 8 this year. Women from the biggest unions, from the political parties (except the right-wing Christian Democracy which leads the government and the populist New Democracy), the national women's shelters associations, women's peace groups, women researchers and professional and all other forms of women's groups came together in a big coalition which organized different activities in different cities.

The biggest success was in Stockholm. Alongside the meeting and demonstration there was a "Women's Tribunal" over the weekend of March 6-7, where 800 women listened to reports from women researchers on economy, health, education, sexual violence and so on.

10,000 copies of a broadsheet from the Tribunal were distributed on the morning of March 8.

A "speaker's corner" was held for hours in the open air, there were many social events, and a seminar with the American feminist Susan Faludi.

More than a hundred women organizers from all the different parties, groups and unions had been active in preparing these initiatives over the last six months. We will now discuss how to keep this new-born coalition together in action.

The next steps will be resistance to the threats to the abortion law and solidarity with shopworkers, 80% of whom are women, whose union will probably be forced to strike during the Easter period.

The tribunal work will go on in other cities in the country with the aim of holding more tribunals before the elections in September 1994. — **Uggan and Eva Nikell** ★