

# **REPORT FROM LONDON WOMEN IN BLACK**

**to the  
XV International Encuentro of Women in Black against War  
Bogota, Colombia.**

**1 August 2011.**

***We thank the Colombian sisters for undertaking the huge task of organizing the XV Biennial WiB Encuentro for us all. Our wish is for a wonderful and productive meeting, and an even stronger network in the years to come.***

Women in Black UK is committed to peace with justice, and actively opposes injustice, war and militarism. We're a small WiB group here in London, with around 50 women on our e-mail list, eight or ten of whom turn out for our regular Women in Black vigils, which we hold every Wednesday between 6 and 7 pm, standing around the statue of Nurse Cavell in central London. (Edith Cavell was executed in the First World War for nursing 'the enemy', and her last words were 'Patriotism is not enough. I must have no bitterness or hatred for anyone.'). We try to design our silent vigils so that they 'speak for themselves', with highly-visible, carefully-worded placards. And we continually revise our leaflets, which are often in the form of a letter that can be signed for despatch to the Prime Minister. We reckon we are seen by up to 6000 people in the course of an hour, and our leafletters have a lot of useful conversations with passers-by.

We also take direct action at Aldermaston Weapons Establishment, where nuclear weapons are developed, and join others in protest at Faslane, in Scotland, the base of the British Trident submarines that carry nuclear weapons on constant patrol.

We have organized the report below around the most persistent themes of our vigils in the last twelve months. We always make our *own government* the focus of our calls to action. Just expressing solidarity with women suffering militarization and war in other parts of the world is not enough when British political and economic policies are a significant cause of it. The suffering is, besides, reflected and reproduced here in our islands, where refugees and asylum seekers from devastated regions do not get the welcome and care they need, and where the poorest in the population carry the cost of British militarism.

Every week as we stand on the street we are strengthened by the idea that there are Women in Black active in the same spirit in other cities, countries and continents. Standing as we do in a well-traversed tourist spot, we get quite a few WiB travellers dropping by and bringing news from their groups elsewhere. Please be sure to contact us if you are passing through London: write to <[wibinfo@gn.apc.org](mailto:wibinfo@gn.apc.org)> and see our page on the WiB website <[www.womeninblack.org/en/london](http://www.womeninblack.org/en/london)>.

We are inspired by the reports to the Encuentro recently circulated by women who are our close neighbours, *Mujeres de Negro* in Spain and *Donne in Nero* in Italy. Reading their accounts of militarization, repression and injustice, we see how similar the trends are in our Western European countries.

### **British military spending**

When the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats took office in 2010, panicking at the £152bn UK financial deficit, they announced public expenditure cuts of £6.2bn in a single financial year, and more to follow. So the major 'defence' imperative for people in Britain right now is defence of public sector jobs and pensions, and of essential public services, including the National Health Service, expressed in huge demonstrations and an impending national strike. Women are disproportionately affected by the cuts, to the extent that a sex discrimination case is being brought against the government.

Even the military budget had to endure a little reduction in this moment of crisis, but the £37 billion budget for 2020-11 nonetheless represents an 11% gain since 1997, making this the longest sustained period of growth since 1980. The result is that the UK is the second highest defence spender in the world, behind only the United States. At about 2.5% of GDP, UK Defence spending is above the NATO European average. Women in Black in our vigil point out that by trimming one-sixth from the military budget the government could achieve its entire public sector cuts requirement in a single move. Instead they are pressing on with the construction of two aircraft carriers to keep Britain's imperial flag (and fighter aircraft) flying over foreign waters, albeit as junior lieutenant in the USA's project of full-spectrum dominance.

And recently (you may have noticed) the UK has been an enthusiastic actor in the military attack on Gaddafi's forces in Libya, which we oppose not just because it costs £6 million a week that could well go on schools and nurseries, but because it is an unwarranted, inappropriate and violent response to a complex political and humanitarian situation that calls for quite other skills and commitments.

### **NATO and the militarization of the European Union**

The British armed forces don't act autonomously. They are tied firmly into the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. It's as part of a NATO force that British troops are fighting a destructive and pointless war in Afghanistan. NATO now accounts for 75% of global military spending and seeks to control the world in the economic interests of the USA and other rich states. The Alliance, pressed by the USA, wants to see an increasingly militarized European Union as its 'strategic partner'. Predicting 'cyber wars', it foresees greater 'military-civilian co-operation' in the name of 'counter-insurgency', further threatening our civil liberties.

Our struggle to demilitarize the UK, to keep Britain out of overseas war adventures, to get rid of the UK nuclear 'deterrent' and divert military spending

to social ends, therefore has to include a struggle to get Britain out of NATO – and to close NATO down. Women of London WiB have been active in the international activism of the network ‘No to War : No to NATO’. Some of us contribute to a ‘Women Against NATO’ initiative involving an international e-mail list in which we have been developing our feminist case against NATO. We also carry out local actions. For instance, at the time of the Lisbon NATO Summit, November 2010, in co-ordination with women in Italy and elsewhere, a troop of us wearing T-shirts spelling out “*Say No to NATO*” in giant letters appeared at sites all over the city centre, giving out information to a public that surprised us by its ignorance of what NATO signifies.

### **Nuclear weapons**

The UK possesses a nuclear weapons system, with four submarines, maintained at Faslane in Scotland, capable of carrying 16 Trident D5 ballistic missiles apiece, each with a load of 12 nuclear W76 warheads, every one of them 8 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. The UK also has a nuclear weapons ‘factory’ at Aldermaston in Berkshire. Of course there is continuing protest in the UK against the existence of this weapons system, and especially against its planned renewal and upgrading at an estimated cost of £97 billion. It is one of the themes on which Women in Black mounts its own vigils in London. Some London WiB women regularly attend the Aldermaston Women’s Peace Camp, and some joined a big blockade of the Atomic Weapons Establishment in 2010. Our aim is to inform the public about the illegality of nuclear weapons and their danger to the countries that own and house them as well as to those on which they are targeted. We point to the huge social gains that could come of diverting the nuclear budget to education, health, housing and the elimination of poverty. We see the infatuation with weapons, from guns to nuclear weapons, as an expression of machismo, associated with the same masculine cultures that perpetuate violence against women in both peace and war. We call on our government not only to get rid of its own nuclear weapons but to support the call of the ICAN campaign for an internationally binding treaty to ban them entirely.

## **The international arms trade**

Every two years one of the world's biggest trade fairs for guns and tanks, military aircraft and artillery, mines and small arms takes place in London. It attracts buyers from all over the world, including the governments of countries known for human rights abuses, to come and shop for the most up to date methods of killing and controlling people. The event is sponsored by the British government, which regularly spends over £400 million of taxpayers' money a year supporting arms exports by British manufacturers. Putting British companies' profitability above morality and responsibility, the government encourages countries on both sides of armed conflicts (India/Pakistan, Israel/Arab states) to buy British arms to use against each other. Many buyers represent the governments of the very poorest countries, where public spending should be on education, health, food and housing. For instance, arms export licences worth over £70 million were granted in a recent year for weapons sales from Britain to HIV-wracked sub-Saharan African countries. We call on the UK government to stop supporting arms exports and to join the campaign for an international Arms Trade Treaty.

Women in Black holds regular vigils in partnership with the International Action Network on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which is based in London. With IANSA's women's network we highlight the fact that 10% of the 'legal' global arms trade is in small arms, such as hand guns and assault rifles, which sell like hot cakes at the London fair. They arm, among others, 300,000 child soldiers in 30 current conflicts worldwide. The Small Arms Survey claims that one gun exists for every 11 people on earth. Over half a million people die yearly from a gunshot wound. We join with IANSA women's network in their Disarm Domestic Violence campaign, making the point that violence against women increases in frequency and severity when men carry guns. In our vigils we call on the British government to ban the sale of small arms in Britain, including sporting pistols, rifles and shotguns.

## **Africa**

We also use the WiB vigil to draw attention to the effects of current wars on women and one particular focus for us has been the Democratic Republic of Congo. The country's Interior Ministry estimate 6 million people have been internally displaced in the course of this bloodiest and most complicated of conflicts, yet it gets very little attention in UK media. We organize vigils in solidarity with Congolese women, some of whom are living in the UK. We make the point that DRC is 'the world's most dangerous place for women'. Rape is being used as a weapon of war, and tens of thousands of women have been subjected to sexual assault and torture. Women are besides usually left with the burden of taking care of shattered families in volatile and hostile conditions. They must feed, protect, plant, earn, carry, and avoid physical dangers. And quite often, they have to do these things after being forced to leave their homes. We commend the UK government for being a significant aid donor to DRC but call for investigation into the role of UK-based companies in exploiting the mineral resources that fuel the conflict.

## **Palestine**

Every first Wednesday of the month, we address the appalling situation of Palestinians under Occupation by the Israeli state for an unbelievable 44 years. We proclaim our solidarity with the Palestinian people, and urge the British government to cease support of all kinds to the Israeli state, to co-ordinate diplomatic pressure on Israel to end the siege and occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, to implement 'boycott, disinvestment and sanctions' and supply massive humanitarian aid to Palestinians. We also state our support for the efforts of progressive Israeli's who are defying their own government, particularly the women of the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace, Women in Black, Isha l'Isha and other feminist organizations in Israel, to halt their government's aggression against the Palestinian people and reopen negotiations for a just and secure peace based on the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

## **Male violence against women**

Like feminist antimilitarists everywhere we are acutely aware of the continuum of violence that links times called war to times called peace, one thread of which is endemic violence by men against women. On the Wednesday that falls nearest to March 8 each year, we celebrate International Women's Day by joining with certain other women's organizations in mounting a vigil against male violence against women, whether this takes place in the home, in the community or on the battlefield, and whether it happens in the heat of armed conflict, in times of insecure peace or incomplete demobilization after war. Last March 8, for instance, we stood with Women for Women International, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Southall Black Sisters, and also linked up symbolically with Amargi, the feminist antimilitarist organization of Istanbul, Turkey, and OWAAMV, women opposing military sexual violence in Okinawa, Japan. Our placards stressed the links in the scale of masculinist violence from the smallest to the largest of weapons, saying "No fists, no knives, no guns, no bombs".

**From:**

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