

Women, education and the big, bad society

The achievements of the women's movement of the seventies and eighties are in danger of being forgotten – yet, with women set to bear the brunt of cuts to public services and the welfare state about to be sold off to the cheapest bidder, they have never been more relevant, says **JANE THOMPSON**



History has a habit of ignoring women. Thirty years ago we thought our re-emerging women's movement would never be dumped in the same way previous feminist generations were consigned to the dustbin of history. It took feminist activists and scholars; women trade unionists and health workers; feminist writers, publishers and artists; and the creation of women's studies classes in adult and higher education, to recover the achievements of previous generations. It was a discovery which both inspired us and strengthened our own movement; and which gave our dissenting political and educational ambitions real roots in strong values and popular protest.

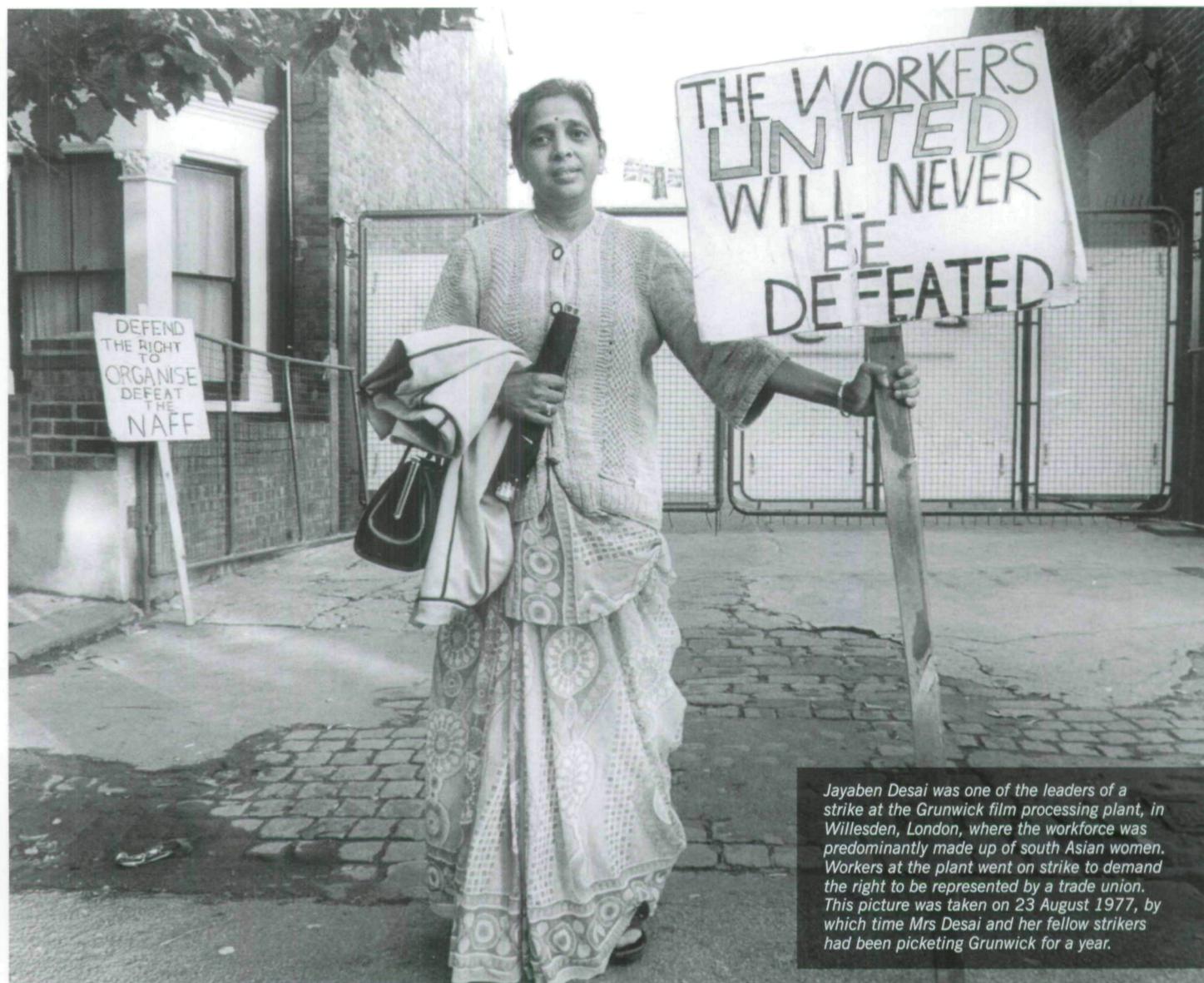
In the seventies and eighties women's growing demand for social and political change was expressed in campaigns for equal pay and against discrimination in the labour market. Women fought for reproductive rights and proper childcare provision, and campaigned to stop violence against women and to put an end to gender inequalities in education. We took action in support of women defining their own sexuality and against pornography; and against the ubiquitous exploitation and sexist diminishing of women in the home, the media, the workplace and the streets.

Night cleaners in London, fishermen's wives in Hull, women Ford workers in Dagenham, Asian women employed by Grunwick, working-class women joining Second Chance and New Opportunities courses in Southampton, Liverpool, London and Newcastle, Black Sisters in Southall, peace women camped at Greenham, lesbian mothers fighting for custody of their children, Women's Aid refuges, Rape Crisis centres, Reclaim the Night marchers, and many, many others, gave the lie to the assertion that women's liberation was the preoccupation of a privileged few. In the process, feminist magazines were produced with national circulations, feminist bookshops and publishing houses were set up, women's bands were formed, and feminist legal practices concentrated on helping women fight discrimination in their own lives and make changes in the law for the benefit of all women.

Grassroots energy

Thousands of women met together in each other's homes, in community centres, in the back rooms of pubs, in town halls, in libraries and classrooms, and in conference halls the length and breadth of the country. Thousands of protests took place, hundreds of thousands of books were written. These were *actual* social gatherings, not virtual social networks. What was impressive and important about the feminism of the seventies and eighties was not its so-called irrelevance to the 'real business of politics' but its grassroots energy, its cumulative effect on legal, behavioural and attitudinal change, and the way it ushered in equal opportunities and gender equality policies across both national and local government and the public and private sectors, especially in relation to education and employment.

The feminist education which flourished in adult education provision at the time was both consistent



Jayaben Desai was one of the leaders of a strike at the Grunwick film processing plant, in Willesden, London, where the workforce was predominantly made up of south Asian women. Workers at the plant went on strike to demand the right to be represented by a trade union. This picture was taken on 23 August 1977, by which time Mrs Desai and her fellow strikers had been picketing Grunwick for a year.

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with and defiant of its context. It was part of a healthy civil society that was sustained by numerous lobby groups, interest groups, protest groups and pressure groups, involving participation, participatory action and a sense of common purpose. It was a time before reality TV came to dominate the media, and shopping and binge-drinking came to dominate the high street.

Feminist education assumed that what mattered most were not simply grades and qualifications or leisure pursuits, but the development of critical consciousness, intellectual understanding and agency in order to change lives. This was a radical, rather than an elitist, conviction in the same way that Raymond Williams believed in the extraordinary abilities of working-class people with limited formal education to engage with big ideas, and Paulo Freire created literacy programmes designed to give power over their own lives to the poorest and most dispossessed people in society. For feminists, what conventionally counted as knowledge – whether it was academic, vocational or recreational – was a social construction, which

had been arrived at over time and was heavily determined by white, middle-class men to reflect their own priorities, interests and partial view of the world. Women's education would set the record straight and re-order the 'natural' order of things.

The favoured approach was to draw on knowledge that came from women themselves, in their day-to-day lives, in order to make theories and generalisations about the shared condition of women. Once women came to understand that what happened to them – in the home, in their personal relationships, in the workplace, in the streets – was not simply random or, more pervasively, 'their fault', they could begin to develop ideas and knowledge about how social and political systems of inequality are sustained. This was knowledge that was not merely useful – to get a grade or a job – but 'really useful' in that it informed the actions women could take to make the changes they wanted.

The Women's Education Centre we set up in Southampton in the late 1970s, and which flourished throughout the 1980s, was organised collectively by its members with

funding from the university, the local authority and the Workers' Educational Association. We took the basic premise that 'from the personal comes the political' and created all kinds of classes about all kinds of subjects, long and short courses, day schools, workshops, study groups, advice and information sessions, social and residential events. Most of the activities were free. In the days before Access courses in colleges and universities really took over, women from the Women's Education Centre who had mostly left school with few formal qualifications moved onto university degrees and more formal college courses.

Friendships were made, support groups were strengthened, books got written, and lives got changed. When the university tried to impose fees for the crèche and reduce the number of tutors employed in the centre, women with buggies marched on the offices of the Director of Adult Education and forced him to back down. Women from the centre went to Greenham and marched against Thatcher's cuts and to 'Reclaim the Night'. Women's Aid and Rape Crisis centres were able to put women in touch with the Women's

Education Centre and drew on women from the centre as volunteers and members of their support groups. For many women, at important moments in their lives, what the centre represented became a way of life.

But times change. Memories are short. History gets lost or re-written to suit different priorities. Now, it seems, it is this kind of feminism that must be rescued from oblivion and from the caricature that has become its legacy as a fringe activity pursued by crazy women with wild ideas based on their bad dress sense and obvious lesbian tendencies.

On the move again

Those who now benefit from what the wider women's movement achieved – changed social and political attitudes, more educational opportunities, better employment prospects and wide-ranging legal changes – are unlikely to know very much about the struggles that made these things happen. It is heartening to know that younger women are on the move again and standing up to familiar but also different challenges in present times, particularly in relation to sexual violence against women and girls and sex trafficking. We need their voices to be heard more strongly and to be joined by others who have learned from experience that securing the good and just society depends on constant vigilance and the refusal to abandon hard-won achievements.

The present crisis of capitalism, as revealed in the global collapse and rapid resurgence of the banking industry at the expense of ordinary people's jobs and services, is one of those moments which Marx would have identified as critical, and which feminism has always responded to, in the belief that when people join together with common purpose they have the capacity to make history and not simply endure its consequences.

But notions of mutual responsibility, common purpose, and collective action that were understood 30 and 40 years ago in all kinds of civil society social movements, workplaces and communities, are now hard to find. The women's movement proclaimed 'no woman is free until we are all free'. Creating sisterhood and solidarity across man-made divisions of class and race and sexuality, for example, was a declared purpose. It is what helped to make the Women's Education Centre in Southampton such an important glimmer of hope in the darkness of the Thatcher years. But the ideological intent of subsequent Tory and Labour governments, and their infatuation with neo-liberalism and free-market economics, disrupted allegiances based on shared commitments and common purpose, in favour of compulsive consumerism, competitive individualism and the survival of the fittest. Just as large and small businesses and service providers now compete with each other to make profits in a de-regulated, free-for-all marketplace, so too must neighbours and workmates compete

with each other for their place in the pecking order and for their very survival. And all this in circumstances in which deep-seated structural inequalities – in Britain, just about the worst in Europe – make non-existent any sense of a level playing field.

What has happened to adult, further and higher education has reflected this wider shift in emphasis to individual rather than equal opportunity, to the logic of the marketplace and to the values and language of business management. In the process, knowledge has been re-packaged, education has become a commodity and students have become consumers in a more standardised and diminished learning experience.

Although women have entered post-compulsory education in much greater numbers than 20 years ago, some subjects and most training schemes remain traditionally gendered. Gone from the curriculum is the burgeoning of women's studies that accompanied the feminist uprisings of the seventies and eighties. The humanities in general are under threat. In the present crisis, any mention of structural inequalities and social purpose has all but disappeared from educational discourses. The argument about increasing fees is much more about market economics and the survival of the fittest.

Business jargon

In such circumstances, complaining about the persistence of inequality is deeply unpopular because it implies conflict, barriers, exploitation and competition for limited resources. It requires moral and political judgements to be made about justice and social worth. So far as women and men are concerned, we are all equal now. On the front-line it has been replaced by platitudes about self-confidence and self-esteem and by an empty arsenal of business jargon about targets and benchmarks, employability and skills, needs and goals, and lessons learned. With educational leaders becoming business managers, and adult educators becoming trainers and therapists, it is no wonder their preoccupations and language increasingly sound like commercial transactions or psycho-babble. It doesn't leave much space for questions of philosophy and purpose, or for 'old fashioned' ideas about challenging injustice, supporting democratic renewal at the grassroots and working for social transformation.

Meanwhile, thousands in the public and private sectors are losing their jobs, local and public services are being cut, the NHS is about to be franchised out, national treasures such as forests and wildlife reserves are being sold off, and adult and higher education is being marketed at those who can most reliably fund it for themselves. It is women – as the majority of low-paid workers in health and public services and the voluntary sector; as teenage mothers, single parents and elderly pensioners; as the primary care

givers for children, vulnerable adults and the elderly; and as those who have most to lose from policies replacing access to further and higher education with deterrents – who will bear the brunt of government cuts.

For those still employed in public and voluntary sector jobs, their enthusiasm for the changes taking place must be far outweighed by watching their backs and wondering how to hold on to what they have. In such circumstances there is nothing like a euphemism – which sounds both innocuous and meaningless – to serve as a distraction until the damage is done. Blair tried it with the Third Way. Cameron has plumped for the Big Society.

Having successfully destroyed the guts and energy and sense of community that characterised civil society a generation ago, Thatcher and Blair's children are now advocating a return of power to the people. In practice, it means shifting public services away from the state to the third sector, on a reduced budget, on a contractual basis that favours umbrella and generic organisations at the expense of front-line support groups and campaign groups, and with targets and outcomes built in. It has the advantage of killing several birds with one stone. It holds the most vulnerable and powerless in society as somehow responsible for the economic mess we are in and individually responsible for getting themselves out of it. It hands public services over to the precarious and dubious care of volunteers. It further constrains the voluntary sector from any dalliance with counter-governmental politics. It further removes their leaders and managers from much association with the front-line where their activities are experienced. It turns the organisations in question into the functionaries of the state (and in turn the capitalist economic system protected by the state) rather than advocacy and campaigning bodies acting in the interests of the people. And it clears the way for private providers and social entrepreneurs to move in and take over.

If, dear reader, you once thought feminists were scary, beware of the new breed of sharp-suited social entrepreneurs currently schmoozing Whitehall, selling ways of commodifying Big Society initiatives targeted towards the problematic, the vulnerable and the poor – most frequently women – so that private financiers and bond holders can make profits on their investments. This is not about giving power and choice to the people. It is about selling off the welfare state and the last remnants of the social democratic dream to the cheapest bidder.

Jane Thompson worked in adult education for over 30 years as a teacher and writer. She has written widely about working class and women's education, most recently in More Words in Edgeways: Rediscovering Adult Education, published by NIACE

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