

Women's movement

# The forgotten history of the “class struggle feminist” current in France

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Although it is ignored by the mainstream media, often caricatured, and unknown to young activists or researchers, the “class struggle” feminist current was nevertheless one of the most active in the modern feminist movement. It is thus not uninteresting to reconsider its contribution to the feminist movement in France. Nevertheless, we cannot here give an exhaustive history of this current. It is rather a question of recalling the context in which it emerged, the questions that it raised and remembering the high points of its activity during the last forty years. [\[1\]](#)

## Definitions

By “class struggles” feminist current, I mean a current that closely ties the fight for the emancipation of the women to that of all the oppressed. We could find some of its ancestors among the first feminists like Olympe de Gouges who, at the end of the eighteenth century, linked from the beginning the fight against the oppression of the women to that against slavery. But more precisely, Flora Tristan (1803-1843) is the first to have defended the need for organizing proletarians internationally taking account of women's oppression: “The most oppressed man can oppress another human being, which is his wife. Women are the proletarians of the working class itself.”

The socialist women activists of the Second, then of the Third International one also fit in this tradition, like the “Free Women” (Mujeres Libres) movement at the time of the Spanish civil war (Manheim, Holt, Heinen 1979). One can also find this tradition to a certain extent among the women trade unionists who created the Confédération française du travail (CFDT-French Confederation of Labour, a trade-union confederation regarded now as close to the Socialist Party) as well as the activists of the review *Antoinette* in the Confédération Générale de Travail (CGT-General Confederation of Labour, trade-union confederation dominated by the PCF).

Nevertheless, great differences exist between these activists and those of post 1968. Differences on the theoretical level initially: contrary to militants of the older generation, the contemporary “class struggles” feminists do not argue that patriarchal oppression flows from the appearance of private property, and capitalism in particular. Women’s oppression existed before this form of social organization, even if capitalism used and uses the oppression of the women to its benefit. (Trat 1997,1998).

Contrary to the socialist women of former generations, they do not subordinate the feminist fight to the socialist fight. In this sense, they did not conceive of the autonomous women’s movement as an instrument to be used as a transmission belt between the party and the “female masses” who have to be politicized, but as an instrument for mobilizing women for their own rights. That implies the principle of a broad, unitive, feminist movement in which various feminist currents would coexist. The actual history was different and we should try to understand why.

### **1970-1980: a phase of expansion and important conquests**

The second feminist wave in France was born in 1970, in the wake of the great social movement of May 1968. Before 1968 the feminist movement was both very weak and discredited in the eyes of labour movement organizations and the French Communist Party (PCF) in particular. The Family Planning association (which did not yet define itself as feminist), founded in 1956, was the only organization taking up the fight in favour of contraception. Until 1975 the PCF, like the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) which was under its influence, regarded feminism as “petty-bourgeois”, or even as a force impelled by the right wing in order to divide the labour movement. This explains, in return, the sectarianism of part of the feminist movement towards the labour movement and political organizations in general.

The new feminist movement was born initially in the more highly-educated layers of women, women from popular layers were more likely under the influence either of the PCF, or the Catholic Church. Françoise Picq (1993) gives a good description of the climate which marked the first ten years of the feminist revival: richness of expression, enthusiasm, humour, activism, tensions and at the end of the first decade, anathemas. She correctly points out that at the start many feminists did not necessarily identify with a particular current, that there could be a certain porosity between the multiple and more or less abstract groups. At the time, all the currents shared the same perspective: that of a radical short-term change in society. But over and above this hope, they were separated by different analytical frameworks and for clarity I will distinguish three principal currents, presented very here succinctly. [2]

### **Various currents**

For the supporters of difference theory, “femininity should be developed”, as a specific creativity of women whose roots are to be found in their procreative function. This current, animated by

Antoinette Fouque and expounded by the publishing house Editions des femmes, had a considerable impact among artists, writers etc. In 1979, this current illegitimately took over the name "MLF" (Mouvement pour la libération des femmes, women's liberation movement) by registering it as a brand name.

For "radical feminism", housework is the material base of the economic exploitation of all women whatever their social milieu; women constitute a class exploited by men; patriarchal oppression benefits all men economically and directly, in the same way; according to this analysis, any alliance with mixed social movements is inappropriate, even dangerous. For this current, the rhetoric of the difference is a simple *avatar* of the dominant ideology. It thus should be fought unremittingly. The review *Questions féministes*, then *Nouvelles Questions féministes* developed these various analyses over the years. This current played a very important role in the theoretical configuration of feminism, in particular in France. For this movement, the principal enemy (Delphy 1970) was no longer capitalism but the patriarchy; the principal fight was no longer the traditional class struggle but the feminist struggle etc.

"Class struggles feminism" does not regard difference theory only as the product of the dominant ideology but also the expression of the primary reaction of the oppressed to their stigmatization, which one finds in all the social movements born in opposition to an oppression. It is thus necessary to oppose difference theory, which defines an essence of women and men rather than fighting against a social relationship of oppression and domination; without however falling into outrageous sectarianism against the women sensitive to this kind of rhetoric.

For "class struggles feminism", all women are oppressed but not in the same way, traditional class exploitation (opposing capital/labour) is intertwined with and shapes patriarchal oppression. For the feminists of this current, autonomous action of the feminist movement has to be combined with united action with other social movements, in particular the labour movement, to advance the cause of women's liberation. This orientation found a real echo among the employees in banks, the post office, the health service or in certain branches of the private sector, leading to the development of workplace women's groups and trade-union women's commissions and many debates in the trade union movement up to the end of the 1970s.

## **Main topics of struggle**

In spite of their divergences, the majority of feminists, and hundreds of thousands of women, over and above their ranks, fought together to obtain the first of freedoms, that of the right to the abortion and contraception, the freedom for women to control their bodies (sexual freedom and choice of sexual orientation). They denounced together the different forms of violence against the women, conjugal rape and domestic violence in particular. They analysed and criticized the traditional division of labour in the domestic sphere and the professional world as well as sexist education. They affirmed that "the personal is political", to break the isolation of women confronting patriarchal oppression individually at home. All were convinced of the need to fight against this oppression and to go forward, making links of solidarity between women, in an "autonomous" movement.

## **A diversified autonomous movement**

How to make these links? For some, spectacular or symbolic initiatives and general meetings could be enough to attract new women to the feminist fight. It should be recognized that the placing of one

bunch of flowers “to the wife of the unknown soldier” by a handful of feminists in August 1970 [an action by one of the first feminist groups to draw attention to the fact there was someone even more anonymous than the “unknown soldier”, his wife] or the signature, in April 1971, by 343 famous women of a manifesto in which they very courageously stated they had had an abortion, found an exceptional echo in the media and the whole of the public opinion. For other militant feminists, it was necessary to go beyond big general meetings in the universities of the Latin Quarter to root this movement in local districts, in particular the popular quarters. Among these women were the small group of militants of the Elisabeth Dimitrief circle, members of the Revolutionary Marxist Alliance (AMR). [3] In their manifesto *Sortir de l'ombre* (Leaving the shadows) in 1972, they provided the foundations of an analysis of the relationship between the feminist fight and the class struggle; they summarized their orientation by a slogan which was taken up by other militant feminists of far left: “no socialism without women’s liberation, no women’s liberation without socialism” and recommended activity in the localities. This orientation was shared by women with no political affiliation but also by far left political activists, in particular in *Révolution* (a small dissident group of the Fourth International and the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR-Revolutionary Communist League)).

We have already quoted three names of more or less influential far left organizations. This is not an accident. The activists of these organizations played a very important part in the launching of the “class struggles tendency” of the women’s liberation movement, taking part in the local groups in Paris which took the initiative of calling the national meeting of women’s groups in Bièvres in June 1974, collaborating in the review *les Pétroleuses* whose first issue was published the same year. Some feminists interpreted this involvement of political activists in the MLF as an unbearable taking over of the movement. While it is true that during these years there were struggles for power between the various currents in the movement that were sometimes painful for the non-affiliated feminists, we cannot accept this vision of their involvement in the MLF as being manipulative. These political activists took part in the feminist movement on the basis of deep feminist conviction which they defended within their respective organizations, often at the price of great effort and major conflicts with other members. This was the case for the militant feminists of the AMR in 1970 and of the LCR later. After stormy debates, the LCR supported the “autonomous” feminist movement in 1971-1972. They also took part in the creation of a unitive movement like the *Mouvement pour la Liberté de l’Avortement et de la Contraception* (MLAC- Movement for the Freedom of the Abortion and Contraception), in 1973.

This mixed and unitive movement chaired by the feminist lawyer Monique Antoine pushed for the creation of several hundreds of committees in a few months, throughout France, including in the popular suburbs. For two years, the MLAC organized permanent pressure on the government to oblige it to change the repressive legislation on abortion. For two years mass demonstrations followed the “scandal” created by the totally illegal practice of abortions by the aspiration (Karman) method. For two years the MLAC organized journeys for women of all classes and ages to have abortions in Holland or England, announcing it publicly (Gauthier 2002). This movement counted in its ranks and/or leadership members of Family planning, the CFDT, *Lutte Ouvrière*, *Révolution*, the *Ligue Communiste* [4], young doctors (of both sexes) but especially of thousands of volunteers, mostly women, convinced of the urgency of putting an end to clandestine abortions by obtaining a new basic right for the women: that to have an abortion without moralizing pressure and to have contraception paid for by the social security system. This kind of movement, which made it possible to obtain the right to a termination (IVG-interruption volontaire de grossesse) in 1975, and involved in its initiatives members of the PCF and CGT in spite of the directives of their leaders, would never have come into being if all feminists had lined up with the sectarian vision of those who reduced the feminist movement to the women-only groups.

For class struggles feminism, an autonomous movement meant autonomy from the State, from religious institutions, from the political party leaderships, but not from the class struggle. It also meant that women led their fights and their movements and did not have priorities other than the defence of women's rights. Mixed movements (led by feminist women) could therefore very well be part of the feminist movement. This conception was thus counterposed to the rather widespread sectarian conceptions in the feminist movement, advocated by "radical" feminism.

Before the 1978 legislative elections, a date on which all the right-wing and left-wing political forces were highly interested in women's votes, the various feminist currents brought out publications. In 1977, the feminists of the LCR created their own review: *Cahiers du féminisme*. This was the only feminist review published in France over twenty years (1977-1998) by a political organization. It took more than two years for this review to be accepted by the organization's leadership as a review of the League and not the hobby of a few members. While launching this review, these militant feminists had several goals: to diffuse feminism within the LCR and in the whole of the labour movement (in particular the trade unions), to look further into the theoretical and political debates with all the currents of the feminist movement. This very lively review (it carried reports on struggles, book reviews etc) was written in clear, and comprehensible language for a broad audience. It had an echo well beyond the ranks of the LCR. The original team, which had been renewed over the years, nevertheless eventually stopped publication in 1998 for lack of sufficient renewal from the younger generations of the LCR (Trat 2011).

At the end of this first period, the feminist movement had given an in-depth shake up to political life. It had forced acknowledgement of new rights for women, had obtained new laws on contraception and abortion or against rape. But for lack of a consensus on the relationship between feminist fights and class struggles or the need for giving democratic structures to this vast movement, it remained an informal, multi-tendency movement that had a lot of difficulty in traversing the difficult years of downturn and reaction which followed.

## **1981-1995: the feminist movement on the defensive**

In 1981, the election of the left government with President François Mitterrand resulted in the creation of a Ministry for women's rights directed by Yvette Roudy and the promulgation of several laws in favour of equality between men and women. In 1982, under the pressure of the feminist movement, a law allowed the reimbursement of abortion by social security [like other medical acts - Trans] and in 1983, a law on professional equality was approved. Lacking any provision for sanctions for non-compliant companies, it had little effect. [5] Feminism thus obtained some legitimacy but at the same time, the illusions caused by a left government considered as a friendly regime made it more difficult to assert a critical orientation within the feminist movement. This was the task that class struggle feminism took on.

## **The neo-liberal offensive**

The Ministry for Women's Rights could be seen as a "shop window": it masked the government's economic and social policy which openly supported part time work and decided the on creation of a parental allowance for the third child equivalent to the social minimum (1985), a measure then extended by the right to the second (1994) and then the first child. Thus, to obtain a drop in unemployment, the least qualified and lowest paid women were thus incited to withdraw from the job market to raise their children at home for three years. At the same time individual childcare for under threes was encouraged to the detriment of collective crèches and nurseries. Thus, in 1994,

when the right again had a majority, it created an allowance for childcare at home (AGED) which gave a substantial tax reduction to privileged social layers. When the left returned to government it capped this allowance rather than removing it.

In the trade unions, the left opposition currents were repressed both in the CFDT and the CGT. In the CGT, the witch hunt was extended into the “women’s” sector. One of the most dramatic examples was that of Georgette Vacher in the Rhone Departmental Union (UD). This feminist militant had developed remarkable work with the working women of the *département*, in accordance with the recommendations of the 6<sup>th</sup> national conference on working women organized in May 1977 by the CGT, and during which the women’s sector had been deeply shaken by the wind of feminism. But she was called to order in a bureaucratic fashion and in despair committed suicide in autumn 1981. Contributors to *Antoinette* having been opposed to the sectarian policy of the confederation towards the CFDT or having refused to accept the coup de force of General Jaruzelsky in Poland, were also purely and simply laid off in 1982. They were criticised reproached for having constituted “a State within the State” with the women’s sector in the CGT. The militant “class struggles” feminists supported the sacked women and created the Club Flora Tristan with them, some women academics also joined. This association launched an appeal to denounce the risks to women’s employment rights. It was the same concern that encouraged the militant “class struggles” feminists to organize the “Etats généraux sur le travail des femmes et les femmes au travail” in April 1982 (see below).

## Struggles

Faced with the cuts imposed by the government, the apathy of the trade-union leaderships and their divisions, workers of both sexes started to fight back and organized themselves in “national inter-union coordinations”: after the students in 1986, it was the turn of the railway workers in 1988. A totally new element was that several prolonged strikes by women workers in the tertiary sector developed between 1989 and 1993 (nurses, teachers, tax workers, social workers) and organized themselves at the national level in coordinations, in which the women took over, in certain sectors, the leadership of their fights, in particular among nurses and social workers. Despite everything these movements remained very isolated. In sectors where women are supposed to work by “vocation and devotion”, they demanded wage rises and recognition of their professional qualifications. Oppositionists on the left in the trade unions, class struggles feminism and researchers in the GEDISST (Study Group on the social and sexual division of labour), popularized these fights. After these major strikes, during which the trade-union confederation leaderships showed at best their reticence to support these struggles, at worst their open hostility (this was the case of CFDT in particular), a new federation: SUD-PTT was born. This trade-union organization, created in 1989 to counteract the expulsion of the most combative CFDT unionists who had supported all the struggle coordinations, chose as general secretary a longstanding feminist (Annick Coupé), introduced into its statutes the principle of quotas for women and is defined in its programme as a feminist organization.

## The feminist movement

Faced with this offensive against women’s right to work, and the mass media which implied that women had no reason to complain any more, that they had won everything, the feminist movement was divided and on the defensive. Should it let itself be annexed by the Ministry for Women’s Rights or keep its independence? Certain militant feminists let themselves be tempted... The class struggles feminists put all their weight in the opposite direction, by developing solidarity with the fights of

women workers, while seeking to develop new fights (against forced part time work for example or obstacles to abortion etc), while seeking to maintain a national and unitive multi-thematic framework. In 1982, they organized a major initiative, the "Etats généraux sur le travail des femmes et les femmes au travail" (Assizes on the women with work and the right to the work of the women) which brought together, in the large amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, 2000 feminists from the Movement for Family planning, feminist trade unionists of various trade unions and militant feminists of different groups to challenge the left government on its policy. This initiative was boycotted by some feminists, on the pretext that this initiative was mixed... After that, there were several years ago of atomization and of the feminist movement into local or specialist groups.

Nevertheless, after some serious events, such as several rapes of women in public transport without any public reaction, and the offensive of far right commandos at the entrances to hospitals or private clinics to try to prevent women getting abortions; "class struggle feminists" created various associations to start again the united feminist activity. We will quote two of them: in 1985, there was the creation, with Family Planning activists, of the feminist Collective against rape. Its activity, jointly with that of other associations like AVFT (Association against the violence against women at work), led to a series of circulars and of laws on the question of violence: against the sexual abuses on the children (1989); against sexual harassment (1992), domestic violence. In 1990, there was the foundation of the CADAC (Coordination of associations for the right to the abortion and contraception) which brought together the Family Planning movement and the national association of birth control centres. This association, thanks to its work of vigilance and mobilization against the far right commandos, in 1993 won a law creating an offence of creating an obstacle to abortion access and in particular a clear improvement of the law on abortion in 2001. [6]

### **1995- 2006: a new cycle of struggle; the labour movement and other social movements in a chaotic recombination**

After many very dynamic demonstrations against the far right commandos and the installation of Chirac's shock therapy government after his election as President in March 1995, in which the Opus Dei was directly represented, there was the start of a broad protest movement. On 24 November 1995, 40,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Paris for women's right to employment, against the attacks of the far right commandos, against the "moral order", on the initiative of the CADAC and with the call of more than 140 organizations (associations, parties, trade unions). It was the first time since the 1980s that different generations of women and men were found thus massively to defend women's rights. It was also a very united demonstration; for the first time PCF and CGT called for a demonstration alongside the feminist associations. This demonstration was the prelude to the huge social strike and protest movement of November-December 1995.

For the first time since the beginning of the 1980s, this large wave of mobilization reinvigorated all the social movements and put new political prospects on the agenda. In the wake of 1995, many associations were created to defend those "without rights": "Act against unemployment" (AC-Agir contre le chômage); "Right to housing" (DAL-Droit au logement); the collectives to defend illegal immigrants, and ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et l'Aide aux Citoyens - Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Aid to Citizens) which would be the crucible of the global justice mobilization and would organize a gender and globalization commission. In these groups whose structure is hybrid and complex - cartels of various organizations but also gatherings of individuals - one finds trade unionists, activists of both sexes disappointed by the traditional left or of the far left, feminist activists etc. It is in this context that the National collective for women's rights (CNDF) was created. In 1997, 2000 people (mainly women) took part in the Assizes for Women's Rights and created the National Collective for

Women's Rights (CNDF), shortly before the legislative elections that gave a new majority to the plural left (PS, PCF and Greens).

In November 1997, the CNDF organised a demonstration for women's right to work, against forced part time work, for a reduction in working time for all, in the context of the Aubry laws on reduction in working time to 35 hours. Then it organized a campaign against forced part time work etc by linking this claim to demand for a real reduction in working time (*réduction du temps de travail-RTT*), and won an end of subsidies to the companies which take on part-time workers although in fact the Aubry laws led to increased flexibility of working time. This demonstration, although modest, was very important symbolically: it was the only one on the question of reduction of working time for all! The creation of this new movement encouraged new feminist activity in the trade unions. In spring 1998 there were the first days of inter-union feminist education on the initiative of the feminists of FSU (national federation of unions in the education sector), of SUD, the CGT and CFDT oppositionists. Since then, each year, these days bring together several hundreds of feminist trade unionists including a vast majority of women.

The CNDF was and is not a unified feminist organization. It is a federation of various associations, trade unions and political organizations joined together with only one aim: to organize a united fight for women's rights. The political spectrum represented is very broad. It functions by consensus. Decision-making is complicated in this kind of collective. It encounters the same problems as other associations created on the same model (eg ATTAC): how to ensure equality between the people who are active in an individual capacity and the representatives of the different organizations? How to ensure a consensus between the militant radicals "on the left of the left" and the traditional left which itself is torn between several currents, etc.

But the CNDF encountered a specific problem, that of being ignored - like the whole of "class struggles" feminism which was its main force - by the media to the profit of other associations or more mediatised personalities, insofar as they do not dispute challenge the dominant social order.

It should be noted once again. The militant "class struggles" feminists from different backgrounds played a central role in creating and leading the CNDF, in the feminist activity in ATTAC and the trade unions. They have also been very present in the setting-up of the global network and the initiatives of the World March of Women against violence and poverty, since 2000.

### **2002-2013: old and new obstacles**

After the defeat of the left in the presidential elections of 2002; the presence of Le Pen in the first round of the presidential elections and the election of Jacques Chirac, the attacks of the right against employees of both sexes did not cease. This provoked many strikes, in particular against pension reform in 2003, which led to a defeat. Nevertheless in 2004, the left won the regional and European elections. In 2005, after a very united mass campaign, in which feminists managed to play a considerable role, the leftwing No to the European constitutional treaty (TCE) won, despite the media steamroller, and the call of the traditional right and PS majority to vote for it. After the revolt of the suburbs in autumn 2005, students then the whole of the youth and workers mobilized massively in 2006 against the First Employment Contract (CPE) and forced the government to abandon it. The complex configuration of social movements was more and more shot through and polarized by the hope of seeing the mobilizations against liberalism leading to a recomposition and the emergence of a political alternative on the left of the left and by the debates that were provoked within the parties. Unfortunately the launch of the NPA with Olivier Besancenot in its leadership and who ranks have been weakened or the emergence of the Front de gauche torn between the Parti de

gauche or Jean-Luc Mélenchon and PCF have not yet made it possible to create the radical political pole that is absolutely necessary to make the counterweight to the right and the far right as well as the Socialist Party.

Between 2007 and 2012, during the five years of the Sarkozy, social inequalities got worse, unemployment increased, state racism against Roms and Muslims or those assimilated to those communities was unashamed. The international context was marked by the ravages of capitalist globalization, the war by the USA and its allies against "terrorism" as well as by the actions of reactionary currents of different religions aiming to challenge the gains of the feminist movement internationally have posed crucial and complex questions for both the new and older feminist activists.

In fact we have seen new reactionary currents concerning gender relations appearing in the ideological field.

"Difference theory" indeed found a new strength under the pressure both of fundamentalist religious currents and of certain psychoanalysts. In the name of divine law or defence of an untouchable "symbolic order", the patriarchal moral and sexual order has been given a new value, against the demand for equality emanating from homosexual couples, and against the idea whereby the feminine and the masculine are the result of a social construction (gender). This is the meaning of the reactionary mobilization against "marriage for all" which recently brought together hundreds of thousands of people on the call of the right and the far right. A second current identified as "post-feminism" was born among privileged women (intellectual and artists) confusing women's freedom and commodification of the body, demands legal recognition of prostitution and its regulation. For them, there is no longer a relationship of oppression between men and women. We are all in a society where we can all live freely, as we wish, independent of social constraints, except for the "unhappy" women who live in "immigrant" districts or in "underdeveloped" countries. For these "post-feminists", to assert a repression of sexual violence would thus amount to playing the game of the moral order. The recent manifesto of the 343 "bastards" or "shits" titled "Hands off my whore" [in opposition to a proposal to criminalize prostitutes' clients] indicates the revival of very reactionary currents within French society.

A third current is very present in the media and society as a whole. It is a middle-class feminist current that claims to defend the rights of women ... executives to benefit from a prestigious job and to discharge onto other women (precarious and often foreign) from the domestic tasks that they do not want to and/or cannot do any more.

In this context, new divisions appeared between feminists. After the big united demonstration on 8 March, 2003 to support the action of the association Ni putes ni soumises (NPNS- Neither Sluts nor Doormats) which held a march of several months through France to draw attention to the discrimination and the violence undergone by young girls in the popular districts. At that time it was possible to hope for a convergence between the feminist generation of 1968 and the new generation. Unfortunately, following their media success and in the absence of an understanding of the importance of "autonomy" of a women's movement, the activists of this association yielded to the sirens of the PS and the government. This latter did not cease nourishing anti-Muslim racism, by excessive "security" campaigns. Since then, some feminists claim to be fighting against a "main enemy".

- For some, the fight against "Islamophobia" is the priority. This is why they defended girls wearing veils (headscarves) at school and denounced the law against visible religious signs at school adopted in 2004 by the majority and the PS. This is why they were active within the movement "Les indigènes de la République" (The natives of the republic) or "Une école pour toutes" (School for all

girls). The analysis of this current is centred almost exclusively on “postcolonial” discriminations.

- Others on the contrary (like NPNS, the Family planning movement, or the UFAL (Union des Familles laiques-Union of secular families etc) supported the law on the veil at the school in order to combat those that they regard as a major risk for “the Republic”: the rise of religious fundamentalisms in the world and in France.

- the CNDF refused to make a stand for or against the law, to avoid division. It decided to wage several campaigns at the same time: against racism, against the moral order supported by the dominant currents in the religions but also against neoliberal policies (which NPNS refuses to do) and against the economic and social inequalities which have worsened and feed the discriminations suffered by women, in particular those from popular environments and immigrant parents. The choice of this orientation falls under the deep conviction that women’s oppression of the women is at the intersection of multiple oppressions: of gender obviously but also of class and “race” etc. Having this analysis does not prevent errors, but it can limit them.

Since then the CNDF has taken the initiative of a campaign against violence against women, based on a national survey published in 2000 under the direction of Maryse Jaspard that indicated that 10% of women were victims of different forms of conjugal violence, and that 48,000 women were raped each year in France. The results of this investigation were the object of a systematic media challenge by the “post-feminists”. Shortly before the election of 2007 the CNDF published an “overall” draft bill on the model of the Spanish law, centred firstly on prevention and help for victims. This campaign was very clearly dissociated from the “security” campaigns of the rightwing government. In its argumentation the CNDF insisted on the existence of this kind of violence in all spheres of society and not only in popular environments of African or North-African origin, as some had wanted to say following the death of the young woman Sohane, burned alive in October 2002 in Paris region. This draft bill was supported by all the associations which fight against violence against women and all the parliamentary groups of the left and far left. But the right sought to use this type of feminist campaign to try to bring in the “law and order” argument. It proposed a new law against violence against women but without the means to implement it. This shows the need for feminists to be always vigilant on different fronts.

In December 2005 the holding of a meeting entitled “Feminist Alternatives” on the initiative of the CNDF made it possible to determine the questions to solve in the near future: how to ensure the renewal of the generations? How to strengthen the links with the young women in the popular neighbourhoods? How to help the young women to throw off the weight of social control which lies heavy on them? How to get into in the media which is open to the “post-feminists” whose first targets are the militant feminists who are considered as “old-fashioned”? How finally to support the joint work of the CNDF and the World March of Women in France, how to redynamize the whole of the feminist movement, on a united basis?

Since then a new association had been created on the initiative of young women on the left of the Socialist party “Osez le féminisme” (Dare to be feminist”). This group has been quite successful and campaigned for the success of the François Hollande in 2012 while at the same time waging very dynamic campaigns against sexism at work or in political life (against Dominique Strauss-Kahn in particular, en 2011). At the same time there have been united-front to support women’ struggles against austerity in Europe and in France, which have taken the form of redundancies, closing maternity services, abortion clinics. There have also recently been solidarity campaigns with the women workers in multinationals in Tunisia or in Bangladesh, or elsewhere. Today the “class struggle” feminists are dispersed in different associations and parties such as Attac, the CNDF, la Marche mondiale (World March), the NPA and/or the Front de gauche. Over and above the dispersion of these activists, they are all committed to defending women’s rights by waging a

resolute battle against the neoliberal policies of the right or the left, against the rise of racism, for a reduction of working time and resolute tax reform.

Nevertheless the divisions created within the radical left by different approaches on the question of secularism have not been overcome. To do so it would have been necessary for the different currents to agree to discuss together, which seems to be very difficult when some are called “white” feminists in the service of post-colonial policies (Trat 2011) and the others suspected of being the allies of religious fundamentalists.

However the analysis of the place of women in the revolutions in the Arab world should push us to seek to unify women’s struggles around demands against poverty and violence, over and above the religious (or not) convictions of the women who are moving into action for social justice and democratic freedoms, against the power of the privileged whether they be military, religious or secular. This also demands not making a hierarchy of the struggles against gender, class or “race” but to try to make the connections between them. Quite a programme!

### **Josette Trat**

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## P.S.

\* From International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

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## Footnotes

[1] I do not pretend to be impartial in this article. I was an actor in these events, in particular as a member of the editorial board of *Cahiers du féminisme* (1977-1998).

[2] 2. On the history of the feminist movement and its conflictual relations with the labour movement, see Trat (2002); on the place of women in workers' struggles in the 1990s, see Trat (1997); on the modifications at the ideological level and recent feminist divisions, see Trat (2006). All these references are given fully in the bibliography.

[3] Elisabeth Dimitriev was an activist close to Karl Marx who came to France to support the movement of the Paris Commune in 1871. AMR was a small Trotskyist group whose leader Michel Pablo was known for his unconditional support for the Algerian revolution. The Elisabeth Dimitrief circle dissolved in 1975.

[4] Only the PCF and CGT leaderships refused to take part in the launching of the MLAC. The official position of these organizations was very badly understood by many members.

[5] For a fuller discussion of these laws see Fanny Gallot, ESSF (article 30424) “[The implications of gender equality at work on female workers from 1968 to the 1980s in France](#).”

[6] We will not deal here, because of lack of space, with the question of parity in politics. Class-struggles feminism was not the leading force on the question. In addition although all were favourable to the feminization of political life, they did not all get involved in the same way in this campaign in public opinion. For a rapid synthesis, see Trat 2006.