

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary

The IIRE 1982-2007 – V – Seeing the world through the eyes of the women and youth

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Women and the IIRE

From the outset, the sessions organised in the IIRE made a point of including at least one lecture centred on understanding women's oppression and the different forms of women's struggle for liberation, and also to integrate this problematic into the sessions in general. This latter aspect was undoubtedly, given the generation and political formation - and gender - of most of the lecturers, less successful.

It was also a point of principle however to encourage women participants, including refusing multiple participants from the same organisation unless the group proposed was mixed, and encouragement for the women present to meet together to share experiences and build solidarity among them. This was to make it easier to confront the usual dynamics of exclusion and undermining of women in political groups that exist even in groups that have explicitly recognised the ongoing reality of women's oppression and the need for a constant struggle against it. This was undoubtedly the case of the core (FI) groups participating in the sessions even if it was in itself an educational process for most comrades but particularly for other groups which had not yet taken on board these programmatic points.

However the understanding and ideas that were brought into play the first ten years of the Institute drew their inspiration from the discussions that had been provoked by the rise of the second wave of the women's movement in the 1970s and were codified in the resolution adopted by the Fourth International World Congress in 1979.

By the time that the three-month sessions came to an end there was a general feeling that there was a need to relaunch the programmatic and theoretical discussion that had run out of steam in the 1980s.

Thus one of the first projects in the new period of the Institute was to organise a women's seminar. The initial concept was very ambitious and explained in the balance sheet written at the time in the following way :

« The seminar as conceived by the IEC Women's Commission was aimed at advancing the thinking of the International in relation to a number of the discussions underway in the feminist movement. This

objective stemmed from a recognition by the women's commission that our current plays little role as a current in these discussions and that they are largely unintegrated into the thinking of the International as a whole.

Thus the purpose of the seminar was to give our comrades who have been involved in leading the women's work an opportunity to share their experience and the development of their thinking in order to collectivise what has been national or even individual development up to now. Like any other leadership educational activity, it was also intended to give comrades who normally carry a heavy load of responsibility a period in which to think more freely without being under daily pressure to develop a line or give answers to tactical questions or quite simply to carry out the usual organizational tasks. »

The session took place in September 1991 using English and Castilian with 25 participants Asia: (5/25) 20%, Africa: (1/25) 4%, Europe: (9/25) 36%, Latin America: (7/25) 28%, US/Canada: (3/25) 12%, 5 of whom who were only present for 1 to 3 weeks of the 4 week session.

However the stated objective turned out to be too ambitious:

« The school was successful for having served a different purpose than the one originally posed.

To hold a seminar for a leadership layer corresponding to members of the IEC women's commission would have required a smaller seminar with a more selective approach to invitations. The development of different sections of the International in their size, implantation, history and general level of political formation is too uneven to make it possible to hold such a seminar expecting that every section can participate. »

Thus, concluded the balance sheet, the original goal of moving forward collectively in our discussions at leadership level was not reached but the school had played an important role in bringing together a newer and younger layer of women comrades willing to invest themselves in women's work and in particular giving them an experience and knowledge of the International and form links with other women from other countries on the basis of personal links.

The school was indeed successful enough to be repeated three times during the 1990s (1993, 1997 and 1998, once using English and French as the vehicle languages).

It also contributed to renewing the content of the "general schools" which in the following fifteen years were variously named "New Questions" or "Global Justice" notably on three points: further integration of the problematic of women's oppression into discussions of Marxist theory, expanded discussion of party and movement using the ideas developed in discussing the autonomy of women's movements, and the dynamics at play inside political organisations in relation to women's participation, which was for a whole period a topic for regular lecture in these schools. The first school to benefit from this renewal was that for "young cadres under 30" in spring 1992.

The content of the 1991 school was outlined as follows:

[It] started from a new look at the discussion of the usefulness of Marxism as a tool in understanding and analysing women's oppression — discussions which have continued since the last time our movement touched on them in the 1970s —in the context of preparing the 1979 resolution. Then the topics scheduled raised specifically some new discussions which we have never discussed at the International level (philosophy of difference, sexuality, sexist/sexual violence). The last part of the seminar was then to deal with problems of building the movement particularly drawn from the newer experiences since 1979 (eg Latin America and South Africa). The last point was a rediscussion of the problems for revolutionary parties in recruiting and integrating women and the problems that

women themselves face (how to build “women-friendly” parties).

This basic structure was maintained during the three following schools although some specific points were changed, added or dropped, for example the introduction of a lecture on women and Islam, or the removal of a lecture on the history of women’s struggle for the vote or the panel discussion on the theory of difference that took place in 1991 but was no longer so pertinent in later years.

The discussions provoked at the sessions were many and various but one was a constant theme: the question of “Eurocentrism”.

Like many other political and social movements, the best-known experiences, because the best-documented, tend to come from those countries where the technological capacity to document and relay these experiences (whether of movements in action or theoretical contributions) is most developed. This is just as true of the women’s movement, and possibly more so as all inequalities tend to become more marked once they are refracted by gender inequality. Therefore much of the material available to us did indeed come from Europe and North America. As the session was located in Amsterdam it was obviously far more possible for us to invite women lecturers from other European countries than elsewhere.

Nevertheless, we made a huge effort, in relation to our very limited capacities, to use resources both in terms of texts and lecturers, whose experiences and frames of reference were other than European (or North American, which in this debate tends to be assimilated to “Eurocentric” thinking). This was an important political task and we can only have partly succeeded.

However it was also important to point out that explaining and using European or North American experiences as a starting point for the discussions was not necessarily Eurocentric, insofar as the purpose of the “education” at the Institute is not a teacher/taught relationship in which the “truth” is passed on but the opportunity for a critical exchange between equals. From this point of view, whether the starting point and frame of reference of the lecturer was from Mexico, India or Britain the connection and comparison could be made with the experience of those from South Africa, Canada or the Philippines so that the understanding of all is enriched and deepened.

What is to be guarded against is the tendency to assume that one’s own experience is the “model” and indicates the path that others will take and indeed one of the original purposes of the seminar was to provide a forum for the development of our thinking in a more international way although an important step on this road had already been the 1991 resolution on women’s and feminist movements in Latin America.

Not all the discussions that animated the women’s sessions - which were in fact women-only except for the presence in at least two of the sessions of 1 male translator and the male staff of the Institute - were concerning the political content. Three points in particular were noted in the evaluation of the 1991 session:

“First of all, there were many protests that the personal data sheets that the Institute asks participants to complete did not ask whether or not they had children. It is obvious that this is a question that should be asked.

Second, there were a number of comrades who expressed a feeling of being very burdened by the domestic chores. It is obvious that to continue to be tied to the rhythm of cooking, cleaning and washing is more burdensome for women than for men because they are in daily life already mainly responsible for this.

Third, the general rule on visitors was quite strongly challenged. This is the rule that says the only visitors who may stay in the Institute are "companions". This was put into questions for two reasons. The general one is that this is giving a privilege to comrades who a) have companions and b) have ones who can come to Amsterdam. The second, more specific to this session, was that the introduction of men into the collective living of a group of women was not very appropriate.

It was felt that the arguments of the need for control over who comes to the Institute and limiting the number of visitors would be met in a more egalitarian fashion by saying that each participant had the right to have one visitor during the session for a limited number of days. Any visitors should be announced in advance and could be refused for reasons of numbers if necessary."

The first and third of these points brought about immediate and uncontentious change to the rules and practice of the IIRE. It is simply surprising that they were only raised after more than ten years of functioning.

However the second point is more interesting to consider. In the first place obviously the extremely limited budget of the IIRE simply ruled out having staff who would prepare meals or do the cleaning. However secondly, for us it was an important political point that should be understood by all - especially the men - who attended sessions that such tasks exist and have to be done, and everybody has to participate. Some interesting experiments in teaching how to clean bathrooms or cook meals occurred!

In at least one other women's session however, cooking became not a chore but a competitive sport and participants had to be reminded that showing off the best dishes from "home" was in this case less important than participating in the discussions.

The women's schools had been launched as a joint venture between the IIRE and the Women's Commission, which took on the major responsibility for developing the programme of the schools, finding the lecturers and reading material and provided at least two full-time "session staff" for each session.

After 1998 this body was no longer in a position to provide the resources to organise this sort of session and such a session has not been held since then.

However in 2006 a week-long seminar was held. Although the participation was as heterogeneous as ever the content was conceived quite differently:

The form of the seminar was something that we rarely try to do: to reflect on our past experience and practice in a systematic way.

Our goal was to understand the development of our women's work and the debates and resolutions it had provoked in a particular historical period - in fact since the rise of the second wave of the feminist movement (1970s)

An introductory report was prepared by two comrades who have participated over the last thirty years in the Women's Commission of the International in order to situate and trace the development in our thinking at an international level (notably through World Congress texts). As this Commission has not functioned as a really representative body since the late 1990s this drew largely on the experience of collective work of the late 1980s and 1990s.

We also asked three countries to prepare reports on their experience: France, Brazil and the Philippines.

The reason for this choice was that these are three countries where our national organisations still have organised women's work - this is not the case for all sections - and have a historical experience of it as an organisation. In addition, coming from three different continents and emerging at different periods of the FI's history they also brought a number of other factors into the discussion: the difference in the development of the women's movement and the way questions of women's liberation are posed, different political and cultural traditions.

The seminar concluded with a day's discussion of the experience of all the participants as women militants in their own organisations and then finally with an attempt to draw some conclusions on the themes that should be dealt with in future in other IIRE sessions devoted to the questions of women's oppression and women's liberation.

Youth schools

The proposal to hold special sessions for youth leaders from Europe emerged after some ten years of the annual youth camp. This camp was first held in 1983 in Germany and has been maintained as a regular initiative of the youth organisations and sectors in Europe bring together several hundred young people for a week of "politics and partying" every July. It is planned and organised by the international meetings of representatives from the delegations while the logistical back up is given by the FI organisation in the country where it is held (it moves from year to year). This initiative draws in particular new young people, on average the "first-timers" comprise 60 per cent of the camp. From this point of view the more experienced youth in each delegation have a role of leadership and accompaniment of the newer and less experienced youth, leaving them less opportunity to benefit directly from the political activities, which are indeed mainly addressed to the newer ones.

This, combined with the ever present need to ensure a new leadership layer internationally, encouraged us to propose a special session whose goal is to encourage the development of such a layer and offers the young comrades a chance for intensive international education. It is held every year that it is possible to gather the minimum number of participants (12-15) that make it feasible.

In the first years the programme tended to be a reduced reproduction of the programme of the general schools. However in 2004 a new proposal was made that started from several considerations:

- the time available for the school is considerably shorter - the best of bad options is to have it at the end of August, knowing that the youth audience has already taken a good week at the end of July to attend the youth camp;
- the youth comrades, unlike the vast majority of comrades attending sessions of the school have already spent probably several weeks at different camps discussing, in the recent period, globalisation and exchanging experiences with young people from other comrades;
- they did not experience and often know little about the founding experiences and discussions that formed what still tends to be the dominant leadership layer in the FI - that is the experiences and discussions of the "1968-1974" layer and in particular the discussions on strategy of that period.

So a new programme was formulated that attempted to combine discussing key elements of revolutionary strategy in both theory and practice with real historical experiences, such as the fight against apartheid in South Africa with the concept of permanent revolution, or different strategies for taking power in Latin America, whether Cuba, Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua or Brazil, Venezuela and Bolivia today. It of course does not ignore the need to understand Marxist method nor the fight

against women's oppression nor the need to build an International.

The enthusiasm and energy of the young comrades can leave us wondering how did we ever do that - although the out to 4 o'clock in the coffee shops of Amsterdam mode has been known to drive certain co-directors to resort to brutal methods of waking participants at five to nine. On the other hand, certain groups have worried us by their too studious attitude...

However one thing is a constant, one doesn't eat well in a youth school!

P.S.

* Penelope Duggan is associate Director with special responsibility for women's and youth programmes. This contribution has been written in collaboration with Heather Dashner, co-coordinator of IIRE Women's sessions