

A Feminist Strike against Debt

By: Luci Cavallero & Verónica Gago

Translated by Liz Mason-Deese

Recently, the transnational feminist movement has taken up the struggle against debt as a banner of struggle as part of the dynamics of the feminist strike. Around the world we have said, “We want ourselves alive and debt free!” (Argentina), “It is us against debt!” (Puerto Rico), “They owe us a Life!” (Chile), “We don’t owe, we won’t pay!” (Spain). It is historic: the feminist movement is politicizing, at the mass scale, the financial issue. And, it is a feminist analysis of debt that allows us to rethink economic violence in terms of its relation with sexist violence. The feminist strike, by denouncing the debt with the International Monetary Fund and private creditors and its impact on household debts, continues to make other debts appear, rendering them visible and reclaiming them. While the bondholders and investment funds apply pressure to collect on all of their investments, on the streets it becomes clear that *we are the creditors*.

This has not been accomplished haphazardly. A fundamental inversion has taken place, demonstrated in workplaces and in homes, in front of banks and against transnational corporations, showing that we do not owe anything. We know that debt is a historical mechanism of capitalism used to loot, exploit, and privatize the commons that we create and re-create, as well as to increase labor exploitation in moments of crisis. The most well-known of these mechanisms is the way in which public debt conditions states. This is a constant, cyclical scene in Latin America: in the 1980s, debt disciplined the democratic transitions in the region following the dictatorships, in the 1990s the “Washington Consensus” of neoliberal reforms pushed new thresholds of debt, and, in recent years, we are witnessing a new relaunching of financial colonization of our continent.

It is only more recently, however, that the circuits connecting that public debt with their effects in everyday life have been traced. This has been accomplished because women, lesbians, travestis, trans and non-binary people resist and put words to the experience of simultaneously being over-exploited as workers in the labor market and as domestic workers, as consumers, and now also as debtors.

Connecting debt, violence, and labor has also been achieved by the feminist strikes. In the call for the fourth international strike, in Argentina, the discussion of debt is interwoven in different territories with a productive and reproductive strike in a two-day event: March 8th and 9th. It is also expressed with the main slogan: “The debt is owed to us, not the IMF or the churches,” demonstrating both a precise diagnosis of the conjuncture and of the movement’s broader horizon. Saying “we want to be debt free” in slums and in unions, on the streets and in the university, is a method of analysis and action that connects finance to bodies.

But debating debt does not mean only talking about debt. Debt is directly connected with budget cuts to public services, wage decreases, with the recognition of domestic work, and with the obligation to go into debt to get an abortion. We only go into debt because we have already been left without other resources. Debt only comes to “save us” because we have been violently impoverished, to the point of an induced precarity. Debt becomes unpayable because first there was looting.

Speaking of debt from a feminist perspective makes clear what feeds the global flows of financial capital, which seek to appropriate pensions, wages, and an enormous quantity of free and precarious labor that is what moves the world today. That is what drives extractivist dispossession and enables the extraordinary profitability of multinational corporations. And we have identified and denounced it due to its direct connection with the increase in labor, institutional, racist, and sexist forms of violence.

Geographies of Financial Capital

Let's look at a practical example of a financial geography that is rendered visible by the feminist strike. The investment fund BlackRock, which is one of the largest holders of Argentine debt under foreign legislation, is the same fund that has enormous investments in Mexican pension funds and that is demanding an adjustment to the retirement system there. The premise that connects financial speculation, an increase to the retirement age, and the non-recognition of the labor of women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people needs to be shown: the profits of the investment fund are guaranteed by extending the years of over-exploitation of that labor. But, additionally, the assets of these investment funds (the money they capture from retirees who pay more for longer) allows them to buy public companies and privatize them. With one move, those workers are forced to work longer, dispossessed of public services, and thus their income is also devalued (as they now have to pay for services that used to be public and free).

This dynamic of dispossession, which accumulates through violence against certain bodies and territories, can help explain why the strike call has taken off more forcefully in Mexico this year in comparison with earlier years. According to official agencies, the country averages ten femicides per day. The call for the strike on March 8 and 9 went viral with different slogans, such as "A day without women" and "Nobody moves on the 9th," that express an organizational accumulation of an "unfolding of rage" as several activists explain. The Zapatistas, university students, artists, and feminist collectives from across the country joined the call, as well as women workers in the maquilas, struggling against some of the harshest employers on the continent. Undoubtedly, what is being interwoven with increasingly more force is the analysis of the relationship between sexual violence and political and economic violence.

That same investment fund that lands in Argentina and Mexico aspiring to social wealth is denounced by the Yellow Vests in France: they accuse it of being complicit in the pension reforms driven by president Emmanuel Macron that were recently the impetus for mass protests. The strike that lasted more than forty days in that country – including everyone from the national opera's ballet dancers to the railway workers – was another powerful scene of the effects of financial expropriation of wages and pensions.

Therefore, the mode of operation of investment funds (which are fundamental actors in the renegotiation of the national debt) cannot be explained through methodological nationalism: they are fueled by the pension funds of one country that they use to buy public debt from another with financing needs, that in turn they can invest in other places by buying mortgage debts or investing in energy. This has also been shown by the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), that has protested

against evictions across Spain due to financial bubbles. In 2018, the PAH filed a lawsuit against BlackStone for its role in causing inflation in housing prices.

Since then, this denunciation has been a central part of feminist and migrant mobilizations and, in particular, it has enabled a connection to be made between the March 8 feminist strike and actions against evictions and for the right to housing. The unionization of renters shakes up the “stop evictions” campaign, putting names and faces to the struggle (#GiselliIsNotGoingAnywhere) and defending renters from house to house. “Since its beginning, feminist practice has been central to the PAH, because its activism was always made up of housewives, elderly women, and migrant women, especially from South America. The crisis of traditional couples is also connected to defaults on housing payments and it usually women who stay in the house with debt” says Lotta Merri Priti Tenhuhen, a PAH activist in the Vallekas neighborhood of Madrid. For this March 8, they wrote: “We are the ones who confront the real estate scam. We refuse to pay abusive rents. We refuse to stay on the street. The struggle for housing is a feminist struggle. Many of us have experienced sexist violence in our own homes, as well as on the streets and at work. We invite other feminist comrades to join the movement for housing, side by side, to stop evictions, reclaim houses, fight against the banks and vulture funds, to demand rights and carry them out in practice through mutual aid, and to struggle so that life be in the center.”

In this feminist strike, we can trace the geography of dispossession and expropriation that are taken advantage of by so-call “investment windfalls.” Struggles for housing, waged recognition, pensions, are all part of the same program of financial disobedience.

In Argentina, retirement benefits have also been a key issue in recent feminist mobilizations. Last July a conflict began over the end of the so-called “pensions for housewives.” Mauricio Macri’s government announced, at the request of the IMF, that it was putting an end to the pension moratorium that allowed women to pay missing contributions in installments, referring to the contributions they were missing due to working in the domestic sphere or working informally, in order to have the necessary amount to be able to retire. The alliance between the union movement and the feminist movement allowed the unions to prioritize, under the slogan “Not one retired woman less,” the recognition of domestic labor as a part of the labor agenda. All of the unions mobilized against Macri’s plan, with slogans such as “The patriarchy has my missing contributions.”

One of the main organizers of this year’s feminist strike was the inter-union coordinator, a historical space bringing together women organizers from all the countries’ different union federations, which has elaborated intimate links between demands in the “reproductive” sphere and the “productive sphere, revealing and challenging their hierarchical relation. Similarly, this trajectory is expressed in a new status for women workers in the popular economy who have been key players in the conversation about non-recognized and unpaid labor in territories and neighborhoods. The Secretary of Women and Sexual Diversity of the Union of Popular Economy Workers, which is inscribed in this line of alliances that started with the first women’s strike in 2016, also made its debut on the streets this year.

The complicity between union and feminist actions and languages has been fundamental. Under the slogan “All Women are Workers,” the alliance was has been able to problematize labor in its multiplicity of forms. The experimentation with practices of social unionism that bring together issues

of rent and labor, pensions and popular economy, the denunciation of sexual abuse and labor violence, has feminism as its foundation. It is not a coincidence that there are murals stating “It’s not love, its unpaid labor” in several of the union headquarters. By inverting the hierarchy of recognition of unpaid labor, it also inverts the burden of debt. The debt belongs to the state, the bosses, and the patriarchs for having benefited from this historically free and compulsory labor.

The debt is owed to women, lesbians, travestis, and trans people in each territory

This international feminist strike that declared in the streets that the debt is owed to us, also rendered accounts of *what is owed to us* in each territory. This March 8 there were assemblies, festivals, and activities across the city and the country deploying that slogan. In the Villa 31 and 31 bis (a large slum located near Buenos Aires’s central bus and train station), a territory in which the local government has promoted a model of “urban integration” that consists of opening a McDonald’s and a Santander Bank in the neighborhood, at the same time as residents denounce the lack of running water and electricity, the feminist assembly organizes an action in the market located in front of the bank. Their call is clear: “what are the tasks that we do, that take up our time, and that nobody pays us for?” Cintia Cuevas from Mala Junta-Poder Feminista, says “As the assembly we want to render visible care work and work in the popular economy, and participate in the international productive and reproductive strike because what many call love is unpaid labor.”

The Popular Feminist Assembly of the neighborhood of Boedo projects an image of a heart-territory over a supermarket in memory of the femicide of one of the workers of that establishment. In Bajo Flores, the Network of Teachers, Family Members, and Organizations organizes a caravan with the slogan “Neither locked up or disappeared, all girls deserve life and rights!”

The slogan “the debt is owed to us” produces a practical investigation in everyday life over what is owed to us, while simultaneously denouncing labor and financial exploitation in each territory. In the same sense, it is not a coincidence that there has been a proliferation of feminist collectives organizing in relation to different forms of non-recognized and precarious work and, thus, in connection to the obligation to go into debt for social reproduction.

This year, during the planning assemblies for the March 8 and 9 days of action, the brand new union of in-home care workers presented itself. In that same assembly, The Assembly for the Comprehensive Health of Travestis, Trans, and Non-binary People told us about their struggle in response to the lack of available testosterone. Ese Montenegro, a trans activist explains “since last year, the national government has suspended purchases for hormonal treatments and they still remain pending. Today trans men, trans masculinities, non-binary people who decide to take testosterone, are not being given access to health care.” Thus the meanings multiply of what it means to say that the debt is owed to us. On March 9, that slogan was the one painted on the main banner in the strike and march to the Congressional building.

#WeStrike because the feminist strike is on!

The feminist strike continues accumulating forces, combining temporalities, and building a program. It was also called in Colombia and Ecuador, where the outburst seen in the strikes in October and November, respectively, is still present. It is worth remembering that those strikes were also in response to economic measures promoted by structural adjustment plans as a result of foreign debt. There were also strikes in Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, and almost all the states of Brazil.

In Chile, the feminist general strike of 2020 came on the back of a mobilization that had not stopped for a single day since it started in October. There, the favored country of the Chicago Boys' experiment and where debt has exploded in all its complexity, sees the most forceful challenge to neoliberalism. The key points of the feminist general strike against the precarization of life and state terrorism include the issues of student debt and privatization of pension funds in particular, as well as debt as a mode of life in a broader sense. The spokeswomen of the 8M Coordinator Alondra Carrillo Vidal and Javiera Manzi Araneda argue: "The refusal of the precarious conditions of the present and the generalized uncertainty in the face of a future sustained by debt was one of the main triggers of the eruption."

The forms of evasion, of denunciation of the feminization of poverty and generalized dispossessions, of the precarity of labor and every life, weave together questions. By asking how to carry out a strike against finance, we also ask what our debts are made of and who claims to have the right to control our existences.

Femicides and travesticides are inseparable from this geography of capital that imposes increasingly violent forms of dispossession and exploitation around the world. Saying "the debt is owed to us" in the international feminist strike *inverts the* burden of the debt: it recognizes us as the creditors and it forces investigations about debt to start in households and on the streets.