

Women against Nuclear Weapons

Preparing for the Aldermaston Blockade, 15 February 2010

By Cynthia Cockburn, Women in Black, London

The last time that many of us were together was at No-to-NATO activities before, during and since, the big mobilization against the NATO Summit in Strasbourg in April 2009. Lifting the sights of our antiwar movements to examine NATO, as a system, and to understand its new scope and growing ambitions, has been valuable – certainly to us in Britain. It has helped us put our local struggles against our countries' separate militaries, and against US bases, into an international context. It has helped us to see the links between us and made the overall strategy visible. This weekend at Aldermaston we are going to focus back down onto a particular locality and a particular weapon. But the difference is, we shall be understanding Britain's bomb as a key component of NATO's European arsenal.

Many of you host US nuclear weapons in your countries under a NATO 'sharing' agreement. Britain is different. We manufacture a Bomb right here. The facility we are going to close down on Monday is literally a bomb factory. Even if we can only prevent it working for a few hours, so long as our actions are appropriate, our messages are clear, and we do our media work well, we can have a big impact.

The current British nuclear weapons system involves three elements. There are Vanguard-type submarines, built, fitted and maintained in the UK. These carry Trident missiles, leased from the United States. The missiles carry nuclear warheads made at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston. The submarines, missiles and warheads are stored at Faslane in Scotland. Some of you know Faslane because you came to help us blockade the submarine base a couple of years ago. On Monday we are going to be at the gates of the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston.

Now, the good news is, the submarines are getting rusty. Sian Jones, who is giving the next talk, will be able to tell you about the history of the Trident system, the British Government's plans for its renewal, and the campaign against it that the movement here has waged for half a century. Today, the Trident system is obsolescent. We are approaching a turning point, abandon it or renew it. The other good news is that some decision-makers know that 'ordinary' nuclear bombs are

really, for both political and military reasons, almost unusable. So there is an open door right here that this country could walk through - to scrap nuclear weapons entirely. But no... the Ministry of Defence appears to want to replace its submarine fleet and to equip it with new warheads. The work you will stop at Aldermaston on Monday is construction work on a building programme to equip the AWE with the facilities to design, test and build a new warhead system.

The estimated bill for carrying Britain's nuclear weapon forward to a new generation is astronomical – it rounds up at more than 100 billion euros. The political decision has been partly taken to embark on this. In 2007 parliament voted in favour of replacing the current submarine system. But the decision to renew the warheads still not been put before Parliament. There is a great opportunity right now, with a General Election only a few months away, to show the politicians that, given the financial crisis, given a country deep in debt, given painful cuts threatened in public services – at this election, spending on nuclear weapons will not win them votes. The moment is auspicious, too, because the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference is happening in New York in May, and at that moment a lot of political minds will be focused on nuclear policy. So, thank you for coming to help us - all to help each other - at this possible turning point.

On Monday, at one of the seven gates of Aldermaston base, there's going to be a Women's Blockade. It's organized by the London group of Women in Black against War, the Aldermaston Women's Peace Campaign, members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women against NATO, the London Feminist Network and other women's organizations.

Why a women's gate? There is a long tradition of women organizing against the Bomb. On the 1st of March 1954 the United States tested a nuclear weapon on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Japanese fishermen in their boat *The Lucky Dragon*, were caught in the radioactive fallout. The incident caused a wave of anti-nuclear activism in Japan. It began in Suginami, an electoral district of Tokyo. And it was mainly *women* of Suginami who organized a petition for the ban on nuclear weapons that raised just short of 30 *million* signatures in two months.

Those French and US atmospheric nuclear tests also sparked off another movement, at the opposite end of the Pacific Ocean. An important part of that was Women for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific. One of the women was Zohl de Ishtar – you may know her books about it. One reason women organized was because so many of the babies they gave birth to after the nuclear tests had terrible birth defects caused by radiation.

Later, in the Eighties, there was a huge movement of women in the UK against the introduction of US cruise and Pershing nuclear missiles. You may have heard of Greenham Common. It's not far from Aldermaston actually. It was one of the bases where the missiles were to be stationed. One day a group of women set out from Cardiff in Wales and walked a hundred miles to Greenham. When they arrived, on the 5th of September 1981, four of them chained themselves to the fence, and demanded a televised debate with the Secretary of State for Defence. This was the start of a spontaneous women's peace camp that soon had more than a hundred women living under plastic and canvas - and thousands more coming at weekends from Greenham support groups that sprang up around the country. The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp persisted till after the last missile had been returned to the USA in 1991.

Meanwhile, women were organizing against cruise missiles at other bases in Britain, at Comiso in Sicily, Pine Gap in Australia and Seneca Falls, New York. On the 12th of December 1982 an estimated 30,000 women came to protest at Greenham Common. We called the action "Embrace the Base", and there were enough of us to link arms completely around its 14 kilometre fence. Women who camped at Greenham went on to contribute hugely to other anti-nuclear work. To name just three... Helen John founded another a women's peace camp in 1993 at Menwith Hill. Rebecca Johnson, who will be blockading at the Women's Gate on Monday, set up the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy and travels continuously worldwide as a respected specialist in nuclear weapons control. She was one of the founders of the Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp in 1985. Sian Jones, who will be speaking in a moment, has been tracking and publicizing developments at the Atomic Weapons Establishment for almost two decades.

So – what is it that brings women out *as women* against nuclear weapons, or against war, or against militarism itself? My work is research. For the last ten years I have been researching feminist antiwar organizing. I have found that women usually have three reasons for their activism. The first is that women have an experience of militarism and war that is specific to their gender. Birthing infants with radiation defects, like the Pacific women, is just one of these experiences. Rape of women on an epidemic scale, as in the Bosnian war and in the Congo and Sudan now – that is another. Then again, women do the majority of care work in our societies, paid and unpaid. They often feel a special anger about military expenditure because it reduces the budget available for the public and social services that support that work, and on which they depend. And so on. Women organize as women to make their particular experiences visible and understood.

The second reason behind “women-only” antiwar activism is simply to empower themselves, to be able to make decisions and exercise choice. Often in mixed groups it is men who take a lead. They may not mean to dominate, but somehow male voices carry more weight. This does not happen in all groups – and I am well aware I am speaking here to women and men from activist groups that are very careful to be inclusive in how they work and respectful in the way they relate to each other. But not all are like you. And women in not-so-wonderful groups sometimes get to think: “I can’t waste my time with this ‘double militancy’ - having to struggle *in* the group in order to struggle *out there* in the world. Let’s do it on our own.” That way they can choose their own strategies of action, do things in a style that feels comfortable to them as a women’s group.

So – getting women’s experience visible; doing things in a particular way...but there is a third reason some women choose to organize as women, and I think it is more important than the other two. It is because there is a feminist analysis of militarism and war that is lacking in the mainstream movement. I shall try to explain - briefly.

Militarism and war are products of systems of power. The main two war-sustaining systems are (1) capitalism – the class power of money and property; and (2) nationalism – the racist power of the state, white rule, ethnic hatred. Both these systems of power, in which some impose their will on others, are essentially, necessarily, violent. The antiwar movement recognizes both these systems of power as sources of war, and mobilizes against both of them.

Feminists say, “Hold on! There’s another system of power intertwined with those two. It’s equally exploitative and violent. It too is a cause of militarism and war. It’s called patriarchy”. They mean the millennia-old, world-wide, gender order in which men exercise power over women, and which fosters a kind of masculinity that thrives on domination and force. The three systems work together, they are inextricably intertwined. Look at any institution – a Ministry of Defence, a bank, business corporation – it embodies class power, white power and male power. Who gets the medals, who gets the bonuses, who reaps the dividends?

So, some women say the antiwar movement needs to address, yes, capitalist exploitation, and, yes, racist, nationalist impulses, but *also* systemic male power. All three, nothing less. And in our very own antiwar movement – just as we try not to behave like little capitalists, and just as we do not tolerate racism, so we should not tolerate sexism either. Our activism has to reflect the world we want to create - totally. Prefigurative struggle, it’s called. *Coherencia entre fines y medios*.

I want to end by stressing that we are not talking here about men and women as such, let alone individual men and women. We are talking about cultures - everywhere from bank boardrooms, to the pub on a Saturday night; from TV commercials to computer games - cultures that set up masculinity and femininity as caricatures of human 'being', that create a whole symbolic system in which particular qualities are ascribed to masculinity, and given supremacy. What is a 'real man'? Being authoritative, combative, defended, controlling, hard, always ready to use violence to defend honour. It is clear that these qualities are deeply implicated in militarism and war. And women make a connection here: actual men *either* find the courage to refuse this model *or* they act it out. And they do so not only as soldiers in the military, but in everyday life as lovers, husbands and fathers - in ways that are very costly to women. So women can hardly avoid seeing violence as a continuum - one that stretches from the bedroom to the battlefield, from their own bodies to the body politic. In a way I sometimes wonder whether our movement is not just an antiwar movement - it may be a movement for a nonviolent world.

Back to nuclear weapons...One day in the summer of 2005, two women came to Stockholm to address a meeting of the prestigious Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission. It was chaired by Hans Blix, you probably remember. He had invited them to speak on 'the relevance of gender for eliminating weapons of mass destruction'. Now, this whole idea was pretty surprising to most members of the Commission. But these women were well respected - Carol Cohn was Director of the Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights and a senior scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Felicity Hill was Greenpeace international political adviser on nuclear and disarmament issues, and had been a security adviser at UNIFEM and director of the WILPF office in New York. They got a careful hearing. And they spoke about how ideas about gender - what is deemed masculine or feminine, powerful or impotent - affect our efforts towards halting the proliferation of WMD. They drew on detailed research. For instance, research that revealed the laddish, boys-own, culture of a certain nuclear policy institute; research that showed how the fear of being seen as 'soft' or 'wimpish' has influenced actual political decisions to go to war; and research that shows the tight link between masculine identity and gun ownership - and how that hinders demobilization after war. The two women told the Commissioners:

"There's now general recognition that there are significant gender dimensions to the possession of small arms and light weapons. It would be naïve to assume that this association suddenly becomes meaningless when we're

talking about larger, more massively destructive weapons. And it's more naïve still to think it doesn't matter."

So, at the Women's Gate on 15 February we shall be holding banners that say: "Spend money on services not nuclear weapons", and "No fists, no knives, no guns, no bombs - no to all violence". These are exactly the words I have heard from women in a dozen countries. They might have been written by Suzuyo Takazato in Japan, or Kim Sook-Im in Korea. And we invite any women here today to join us. If you have come from other countries, if perhaps you are not in affinity groups already, and feel like joining us in putting this message across, we would love to see you there.

This paper is on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/yexgtfe>

Keep up with women's action against NATO at www.wloe.org and <http://www.wloe.org/Women-and-peace.82.0.html>

Women in Black London: <http://www.womeninblack.org.uk/London.htm>

For more on Cynthia Cockburn's work: <http://www.cynthiacockburn.org/>