

The Political Invention of the Feminist Strike

[Luci Cavallero](#) and [Verónica Gago](#) March 23, 2021



In February, nineteen-year-old Úrsula Bahillo was murdered, stabbed to death, by her ex-boyfriend Matías Ezequiel Martínez, a police officer. Argentina’s feminist movement, a movement that has grown in opposition to all the forms of violence against women and feminized subjects, was quick to respond with protests around the country and making the lessons of Úrsula’s femicide central to the call for the March 8 Feminist Strike. In all the protests, banners could be read saying: “Who protects me from the police?” and the implicit response: my amigas, compañeras, the feminist networks and their practices of self-defense. Indeed, the first women’s strike called in Argentina in 2016 was in response to another brutal femicide – that of sixteen-year-old Lucía Pérez – and since then a strong campaign has grown around a critique of the patriarchal justice system. This patriarchal justice system finds excuses for her murderers and questions Lucía’s actions and clothing more than the action of her killers, finding them guilty of selling drugs to a minor, but nothing else.

The case of Úrsula was especially striking because she “did everything right”: she filed multiple complaints against her ex for threatening and stalking her, she tried to work within the system, and, yet again, the police protected their own, her murderer, instead of her. “The state is responsible,” as the slogan states, not only for guaranteeing impunity to the killers, but for arming them and putting them in positions of power in the first place. The state, together with

financial and real estate capital, is responsible for housing policies that privilege heterosexual families that make it harder for women and LGBTQ+ folks to flee violent relationships. The state is responsible for enabling transnational mining corporations to exploit Indigenous lands and the multiple forms of violence that ensue: violence against women, against nature, against the territory, against culture and ways of life.

Yet, the feminist movement has gone beyond rendering visible the escalation of gender violence and denouncing the role of the state and capital. Feminist self-defense in this context takes on multiple forms. It is the self-defense of feminist community organizations that, through women's labor, creates and maintains the infrastructure necessary to escape abusive relationships (whether they be in the household or the workplace, inflicted by the state or one's partner): from communal housing arrangements to food banks and soup kitchens to community security groups to cooperatives to autonomously generate incomes. That is why the feminist strike emphasized the demands of these networks: recognition and better pay for these community workers. Feminist self-defense is the self-defense of land defenders who fight for territorial, cultural, and material sovereignty of their body-territories. Feminist self-defense is the networks of small-scale agricultural producers organized in the Unión de Trabajadores de la Tierra who, in times of crisis, distribute their produce at affordable rates so that no one goes hungry. It is this feminist self-defense that has become even more important in times of the pandemic crisis as Cavallero and Gago discuss here and that took center stage in this year's Feminist Strike.

This March 8 was the fifth consecutive year of the international feminist strike, nourishing a process that has become increasingly complex over time, a process that requires sustaining transversal coordination each time and marks a decisive event in the history of the recent cycle of mass feminism at the national and transnational level. [Transnational feminist activists](#) have established March 8 as a global date that, in each particular place, enables the date to simultaneously express an internationalist experience and the specificities of each conjuncture. It is constructed as a political process, and therefore as an accumulation of forces that proposes an agenda, deepens debates, subverts obedience, and weaves horizons.

The [meanings enabled by the feminist strike](#) are linked to the struggles historically related to the labor and living conditions of the majorities, that are updated today to account for the forms that labor takes as generalized precarity and the tasks that are rendered invisible and naturalized, again and again, for certain bodies. A year into the pandemic, these understandings are urgent because they explain all the everyday violence, connecting both obvious and less obvious threads. The strike makes it possible to take these questions linked to structural violence and turn them into a strategy of political intervention in the midst of the crisis. It also traces a historical link with the archive of strikes (from the women's rent strike of 1907 to the factory strikes in the 20th century to the strikes in the highways of the unemployed workers, better known as roadblocks).¹ But now it broadens its meaning even further, taking that practice to domestic interiors, to community territories and the streets: all the labor spatialities that the feminist strike brings to light.

The feminist strike provides a class content to the demands and the language of the protest even if the vocabulary is not explicit, precisely because it brings us to stop the machinery that makes social reproduction possible, demonstrating its strategic character, which is, at the same time,

constantly hidden. The feminist strike, unlike the traditional labor strike (that is, of the masculine, waged, unionized labor movement) is not linked to categorized and recognized “trades,” but rather tasks that sometimes even invent their own names to make them palpable. At the same time, it refers to production and its inevitable link with reproduction and makes explicit why certain tasks correspond to a determined sexual division of labor and why capital accumulation is impossible without gender mandates. In this sense, it is simultaneously a labor strike and an existential strike: it shows the areas in which life and work become mixed and lose their distinction. At the height of the pandemic, “stay at home” (a historic twist on the “from home to work and work to home”) has been a major laboratory of that indistinctness.

The strike to trace the complete map

This year, the 8M has become fully involved in issues that mark the conjuncture, but it has redefined it according to a feminist pedagogy: that is, proposing analysis while also developing programmatic interventions. The strike singles out judicial power as a gear in patriarchal violence, as well as in financial-economic power, and the urgency of demands for economic autonomy as an indispensable part of any confrontation with sexist violence.

That is, the strike traces the complete map of what is being disputed today, using slogans that combine a denunciation of judicial and police impunity, while also demanding monetary recognition and higher incomes for the most precarious workers, those in charge of the popular infrastructure that makes life possible in the middle of devastated territories. The slogan, “the community health workers take care of us,” is eloquent in this sense. It is a way of stating the demand for care in a union register because it requests rights and better pay. It brings together, instead of dividing, work and care. It challenges institutional violence and, in turn, points to the force of neighborhood self-defense understood as a struggle for resources, ranging from the right to housing to delinking food prices from the value of the dollar.

We could say that the feminist movement has politicized the denunciation of judicial power from below and, in that politicization, the demand for justice is connected to a demand for living conditions that would make it possible to leave a situation of violence. We know that the issue of justice is extremely complicated. There is no need for punitivist or carceral shortcuts or quick phrases. However, when the feminist assembly addresses judicial power, when the neighborhood assemblies name that opaque power, they point to its structural character and clearly show how it operates in a racist, classist, and sexist manner. The denunciation in itself is not enough to change it, but removing it from its palace enclosure and the complicated language of its procedures is certainly an important step.

The feminist diagnosis of violence, which includes the judicial system, also confronts the media morbidity that attempts to freeze us in a position of perpetual victimhood and of necropolitical accounting of femicides. Undoubtedly, the impact of violence as an everyday experience has a lot to do with the expansion of a feminist sensibility that names, denounces, and produces comprehension about its root causes. But, that is primarily because this movement allows for confronting violence and not only suffering from it. Organizing to fight for better incomes, for housing, to overturn repressive legislation, against the precaritization of lives, against institutional racism, are concrete forms of mapping this swarm of different forms of violence and

defining tactics in territories where that violence is condensed and reinforced. In that process, the strike demonstrates that we are also value producers, workers and creators of worlds and forms of sociability even in conditions of extreme precarity. The feminist strike, in that sense, raises a desire for a program, and not only for denunciation.

That is why the demand for better income and recognition of invisibilized tasks takes on a key role in this strike, and the demand for approving the trans-travesti labor quota law took center stage. That is because the strike makes demands based on a realist recognition of who makes up the working class at present, starting with those who historically have been denied the privilege of the cis-heterosexual wage.

How do we go on strike against real estate and financial capital?

In opposition to the idea of a suspension that seemed to be established in the pandemic, real estate and financial capital never took a break. That is why it is important to continue expanding our imagination of what it means to strike: how can we remove ourselves from the constant extraction of financial and real estate rents? How do we stop them, and confront them? What type of political alliances does this require? The demand for housing became a critical point this year. It starts from a diagnosis of what it means to rent as a woman and head of household with children, as a lesbian, travesti or trans person for whom the conditions imposed by property owners and real estate owners are impossible to reach. It also includes a denunciation of the fact that rental law and the prohibition on evictions are not being followed and a demand for the extension of the prohibition and a demand for a debt relief policy for debts accumulated during the pandemic. The networks of assemblies in the slums of the City of Buenos Aires have also made this denunciation, explicitly stating that urban redevelopment plans do not take feminist demands into account, in places where reporting a violent man can mean losing your home, or, in the case of Villa 31 y 31 Bis, where urban redevelopment under the current Mayor of Buenos Aires, Horacio Larreta, is carried out based on a [plan that would force people to take out mortgage debts](#), paving the way for legalized eviction due to the accumulation of debts. But the feminist diagnosis also discusses and debates how to confront the agribusiness rent that leaves the majority of the population without access to affordable food by tying prices to the dollar. In this strike, the demands of campesina women for land and for an organic agricultural model also take on a new centrality, and the feminist verdurazo – in which campesinx organizers occupy public space and distribute produce for free – becomes a mode of strike.

Feminist unionism, the best vaccine against the pandemic

In opposition to certain operations of the hegemonic media, that seek to reduce feminism to a cold recount of femicides, the feminist strike enables other meanings capable of responding to pain, but without becoming trapped in victimism. It makes it possible to say each name and shout for justice, producing a collective force that is capable of holding up a banner that signals a question with certainty: “who protects us from the police?”

In the case of Argentina, it must be highlighted that the list of demands manages to bring together the signatures of the country's five main union federations. It is a rubric of transversality that has a feminist framework, that is synthesized in the phrase "All Women Are Workers." It describes a historical event, endorsed in the press conferences that chose the monument to labor as their stage for bringing together women leaders from all the unions, including that of the popular economy ([8M demands](#)).²

But feminist unionism also exceeds the unions. It is a way of organizing demands and claims, that takes seriously how feminism has broadened the concept of work and focusing in on social reproduction. Feminist diagnoses of the pauperization of the conditions of waged, domestic, migrant working conditions, under accelerated processes of precarization, are even more true in the pandemic, both because they expand the notion of labor and because propose union strategies for intervening in that expansion. Demonstrating the multiplication of working days within one single day, the exhaustion involved in putting one's body on the line in the crisis, simultaneous tele-work with school work and childcare in the home, all the juggling required to make ends meet with incomes that become smaller in line with the rate of inflation, the replacement of the state's responsibilities by overly exhausted networks whose resources are never enough, expands the field of struggles, it points to free labor, disputes recognition and resources that include, while also going beyond, the wage.

If, at the beginning of the pandemic we asked if we were facing a [restructuring of class relations within the domestic sphere](#), that attempted to make households into a laboratory for capital, today we have many more elements to map that dispute.

Exercising the feminist strike again, here and across the world, enables us to carry out a confrontation on that plane. The question is how to keep building a unionism that overflows the framework of the demand of waged workers, to take the agility and astuteness of demand-based struggle to the terrains of social reproduction: housing, healthcare, education, care, neighborhood security. It is a matter of creating alliances with workers in each sector, but also of building an agenda that goes further because it includes neighborhood residents, users, renters, precarious workers. It is a question-horizon that emerges because when we go on strike we also produce the time for political invention.

– *Translated by Liz Mason-Deese*

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References

References

¹ In one of the world's first rent strikes, in 1907, women in a tenement house in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Barracas refused to pay their rent in response to a 47% rent increase and prohibitions on renting to women with children. The rent strike soon spread to other buildings, neighborhoods, and cities across Argentina. In the late 1990s, the unemployed workers' or *piqueterx* movements took the strike to the streets, blockading major roadways and bridges, demanding increased benefits and other resources.

The demands were organized around eight key areas: 1) We strike to make visible the conditions of hyper-exploitation imposed on women, lesbians, bisexuals, travestis, and trans and non-binary people in the pandemic crisis, because we are the ones who take on more care work in homes and in communities, with lower wages and higher unemployment rates, while we are also the ones who live in situations of greater precarity. 2) We strike because we want the Travesti-Trans Labor Quota Law! 3) We strike for Feminist Judicial Reform! ¹²Down with patriarchal justice! 4) We strike against sexist violence! Stop femicides and travesticides! Stop police repression and institutional repression. The state is responsible. 5) We strike to reclaim economic autonomy because we want ourselves alive, with land and housing, and debt free! Against the looting by companies that take advantage of the pandemic to increase their profits. 6) We strike because we want to be free! Not everyone is here: we are missing those who are incarcerated because of having abortions or obstetric events. 7) We strike against racist, colonial violence. Stop terricidal extractivism!

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