

## *Feminisms Today: Conversations Across 50 Years of Activism*

### **Hilary Wainwright**

Hilary Wainwright was active in the Women's Liberation Movement as a socialist feminist, and was present at the Ruskin conference in 1970. Along with Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal she wrote *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (1979). She is the editor of *Red Pepper* magazine.

### **Alice Robson**

I'm a member of Feminist Fightback, an anti-capitalist feminist collective based in east London. Over the last twelve years, we've been involved in campaigns against nursery cuts, to stop the closure of the Women's Library, and to defend and extend access to abortion. We've taken action in solidarity with sex workers, cleaners striking for better pay and working conditions, and women in immigration detention. My initial step into politics came through campaigning against university tuition fees while a student at my local college of further education. Like many others of my generation, I was politicised by the Iraq war and by my participation in the protest against it. I was not involved in specifically feminist activism at university; as a history student, it was reading about women's struggles in the nineteenth century that sparked my interest in feminism. Soon after moving to London in 2007, I went to a conference called Feminist Fightback, organised by a group of women active in the student movement, and then a meeting where the idea of forming a collective was proposed. I was excited by two things. Firstly, the interest in developing an understanding of the interconnecting and mutually structuring role of gender, race, class and other forms of oppression. Secondly, the importance placed in how we do politics, not just what we do. My day job, teaching English to migrant adults, has undoubtedly contributed to shaping my political outlook. The lives of many of my students have been deeply impacted by the austerity regime and the hostile environment – in ways that it is impossible to leave at the classroom door. Feminist Fightback's current campaign takes up the issue of differential access to healthcare, focusing on charges for NHS maternity and abortion services faced by some migrants. We are continuing to learn from Black feminist theorists and activists about the need for a reproductive justice framework: placing so-called 'choices' about reproduction into the wider social context in which they are made, raising questions of who 'deserves' to give birth or terminate a pregnancy safely.

## **Laura Schwartz (chair)**

I'm a historian of British feminism and a member of the activist collective Feminist Fightback. I'm the author of *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation 1830-1914* (Manchester University Press, 2013) and *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class and Domestic Labour in the Suffrage Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). I also teach a module on British feminism from the 1840s up until the present day. Feminist Fightback was founded about 12 years ago. We are an anti-capitalist feminist collective that meets regularly in London, and we have campaigned on issues ranging from nursery cuts, cleaners' strikes, saving The Women's Library from closure, sex workers' rights, and reproductive justice. Our current campaign is against the NHS charges imposed on some migrants for abortion and maternity care. In some ways my activism came first, and has informed my academic research. The idea for *Infidel Feminism* came in part from my experiences in the anti-Iraq war protests from 2003 onwards and the questions they raised for me about women's relationship to both the supposedly secular state and religious fundamentalism. *Feminism and the Servant Problem* is informed by contemporary feminist debates on how to incorporate reproductive labour into class struggle, and by the rise in recent years of militant industrial action by (usually migrant) domestic workers. At the same time, my activism has always been supported and inspired by learning about feminist struggles in the past, and the advantages of having a job that allows me time and space to think about these questions and keeps me in touch with a new generation of feminists through my teaching. For me, the power of history is its ability to de-naturalise the present and remind us that things were and could yet be different.

I've also become increasingly interested in historicising the present feminist moment, especially thinking about what has changed since I became involved in the mid-2000s. Feminist Fightback has also developed and changed in response to the shifting historical/political context. Whereas in the early days we called ourselves 'socialist feminists' (identifying with this strand of feminism in the Women's Liberation Movement, from which we still gain much inspiration), we now more frequently use the term 'intersectional feminism' (as we learn more from Black and anti-racist feminism from the 1970s up to the present day), in order to articulate a politics that seeks change at the structural and material rather than just the representational, level. We have also adapted our membership policy in order to further strengthen the relationship between feminism and trans-rights. While we always had a 'trans-inclusive' position, open to all self-defining women; we recently expanded this so that people of all genders and none seeking feminist solidarity can join the

collective. We are interested in how feminism can continue to foreground the needs and experiences of people constructed as 'women', while in the process destabilising and transforming oppressive gender binaries.