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8M – The great feminist strike

Introduction

Isabell Lorey

Translated by: Kelly Mulvaney

NiUnaMenos, NonUnaDiMeno, Nicht Eine weniger, NotOneLess, not one more murder of women*. It's enough.

The first protests of NiUnaMenos, then a group of journalists, activists and artists in Argentina, took place on March 26, 2015 in the neighborhood of Recoleta in Buenos Aire – after Daiana García was found there ten days earlier dead in a garbage bag. The name NiUnaMenos recalls the Mexican poet and human rights activist Susana Chávez, who for the first time in 1995 used the slogan "Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerta más" (Not one woman less, not another dead woman) in a call against the high number of murders of women, of femicides, in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez. Chávez, too, was murdered in her hometown in 2011. She was 36.

Just a few weeks after the first NiUnaMenos protest, impressive marches were held again in Argentina's major cities on June 3, 2015. In Buenos Aires alone, 200,000 people took to the streets.[1] In solidarity with the large mobilizations in Argentina, marches

and rallies against violence against women* took place on the same day in Uruguay, Chile and Mexico.[2] The movement went viral and transnational. At the same time the protests were no longer just about femicide. They expanded thematically to encompass all forms of gender-specific violence and discrimination. They were directed against heteronormative bi-genderism, sexism, transphobia and homophobia, and they demanded the legalization of abortion as well as rights for sex workers and trans persons. A further slogan emerged: "#Vivas Nos Queremos" (We want ourselves alive).

NiUnaMenos called for the first feminist mass strike in Argentina on October 19, 2016.[3] This time the call came on the occasion of the murder of 16-year old Lucía Pérez, who was brutally raped by a group of men and impaled in the Argentine coastal city Mar del Plata.[4] In the public sphere the murder was depoliticized as drug violence or as a singular act of evil. NiUnaMenos deployed the strike as a political tool against these discourses and changed its strategy for struggle and analysis: against all forms of victimization, the strike situated violence against women* in a broad economic and sociopolitical context. At the same time, the strike was extended as a political tool far beyond its classic labor-union understanding, as women* strike in whatever places they work and are active. The strike in this way includes workers of the informal economy as well as care workers in the economies of private households, who are not organized in unions, and it calls attention to the exploitative and violence-saturated relationships inscribed in these spaces. Men who exercise violence against women* cannot be seen as mere individual cases, not simply as psychopaths. Rather the goal is to understand and to struggle against the sociopolitical and economic conditions that call forth, endorse and play down this violence. The strike of the uncountable many is predicated on much more than wage labor.

The trivialization and depoliticization of the murder of Lucía Pérez and of violence against women* in general, the recurring depiction of this violence as a "romantic conflict," a "crime of passion," a "family tragedy," or "domestic violence" made sparks fly across borders. It led to feminist strikes, solidarity protests and demonstrations in other countries, mostly in Latin America: in Chile, Uruguay, Peru and Mexico once again, but this time also in Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay and Spain – all using the slogan NiUnaMenos.[5] "Tocan a una, tocan a todas" (If they touch one woman, they touch us all). Alongside the mourning, the demonstration brought an enormous collective power into the streets, the power of the transnational feminist mass strike. New feminist alliances, heterogeneous confluences, a manifold feminism of the multitudes. Multiplicity was posed here against the ideology of traditional, nationally organized (union) labor struggles – not to the weakening of the movement, but to its strengthening and transnational spread.

After the United States women's march in Washington, D.C. on January 21, 2017 against the sexist, homophobic and transphobic statements of the then just inaugurated US President Donald Trump, this movement also expanded its focus, following its Latin American predecessors. The call "Women of America: we're gong to strike," published in February 2017, mobilized for a large strike for a "feminism for the 99%."[6] The slogan referred not only to the Occupy movement in the US from 2011 to 2012, but also aimed to call attention to the fact that the attack on women and all workers had already started with neoliberalism, financialization and corporate globalization and had intensified in extreme ways, especially for women of color, unemployed and migrant women. The new international feminist movement was therefore to be "at once anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-heterosexist and anti-

neoliberal". Violence against women*, these US authors wrote, cannot be separated from the "violence of the market, of debt, of capitalist property relations, and of the state; the violence of discriminatory policies against lesbian, trans and queer women; the violence of state criminalization of migratory movemetns; the violence of mass incarceration; and the institutional violence against women's bodies through abortion bans and lack of access to free healthcare and free abortion."[7] On March 8, 2017 two million people in the United States took to the street with the motto "A Day Without Women."[8]

Already in fall and winter of 2016 and 2017, it had become clear in many places around the world that March 8, 2017 would not be an ordinary International Women's Day ritual. The transnational movement wave spread across the globe. The NiUnaMenos movement had not only inspired, but, with millions of women (and men), became a crucial part of the first worldwide women's strike.[9]

These strikes and marches were by no means a spontaneous cry over singular extreme cases of sexual violence, to be brushed off as ultimately non-political events. Only possible after months and years of organization did it become possible for two large women's strikes to be organized in less than one year in Argentina. Many of the organizing efforts there emerged in and from informal social contexts, while other initiatives had formally existed for years or decades. The Argentine national women's conference, Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres, which has met three days annually for over thirty years, was crucial to the organization of the new women's movement. In October 2016, over 70,000 women, including women from other countries of the continent, joined the meeting in Rosario, where the femicide of Lucía Pérez was made known. As early as 2003 the *piqueteras* had participated in the meeting, that is,

the women of the anticapitalist unemployed workers' movement who organized in neighborhood assemblies and through actions against neoliberal exploitation.[10] The practices and strategies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the most important human rights organization in Argentina, also belong to the genealogy of the new women's movement in Argentina.[11] Departing from these historical lines, in 2016 it was possible to develop the feminist movement beyond a "single issue movement," and to create transnational alliances against neoliberal exploitation and extractivism in general. The feminist impetus gave way to a worldwide movement against capitalist and sociopolitical domination relations, against economic, social, political and juridical injustice.[12]

The contemporary feminist struggles are not only multiple and manifold in their geopolitical spread and transversal orientation. They also draw lines through time. As in the song sung at many of the demonstrations, "Somos las nietas de todas las brujas que no pudieron quemar, pero es el momento de alzar nuestra voz y gritarle al mundo ¡NI UNA MAS!" (We are the granddaughters of all the witches they couldn't burn, but it's time to raise our voice and yell to the world, NOT ONE MORE!")[13] The discontinuous time-lines of refusal and rupture also actualize Rosa Luxemburg's theory of the strike at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which the mass strike is imagined as a revolutionary force that changes its direction and the movement but does not stop, instead always starting up again, continuously beginning anew[14] – as for example in the 1975 women's strike in Iceland, where 90% of women stopped working for twenty-four hours in a struggle for equal wages. Twenty-five years later, in 2000, the first international campaign for a worldwide women's strike was established, which called for a suspension of all care work with the aim of gaining

wages for housework: instead of investment in the military, this was an appeal for investment in care.[15] Seventeen years later, in 2017, a women's strike was achieved in sixty countries.

In Spain, however, where hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women, took to the streets, this successful strike was only to be the precursor to a much larger feminist strike in March 2018. The feminist wave in Spain was composed of many confluences that trace back to the practices and organizing efforts of the 2000s, the first campaigns for a worldwide women's strike and the activist-theoretical elaborations of the Madrid collective Precarias a la deriva from 2002-2003, which called for an anticapitalist care strike – a new form of political strike that "refers to all practices that unravel the politically radical character of care, … that bring the sustainability of common life into focus, that challenge the capitalist logic of accumulation at its core."[16]

Already in fall 2017 more and more women* in Spain, in more and more neighborhoods, in more and more assemblies, began to meet to discuss and plan the feminist strike. In regularly occurring regional and Spain-wide meetings, strategies and tasks were debated and distributed. Donations were collected, posters and flyers could be seen everywhere, and the press reported widely on this growing and increasingly omnipresent wave of a new feminist movement that appeared to include so many. Schoolgirls* planned to interrupt their lessons, entire universities went on strike. The organizing took place in close exchange with activists from Argentina and many other countries. There was a broad alliance with many organizations and unions. And despite all this it was impossible to estimate how many people would actually join the strike; how many would cease to work for at least two hours, if not for the whole day, and take to the streets. And up to midday on March 8, 2018 there were more and more, in Madrid over a

million. Six million women (and also men) in over 300 cities across Spain participated in what became the biggest strike not only in the history of the country, but also of all of Europe.[17]

Across Europe, including in the German-speaking countries, there are increasingly indications that a similar wave could emerge. Gender-specific relations of exploitation and violence and the structural devaluation of care are not limited to the "Global South" or to the South and East of Europe. Violence against women in hierarchical, patriarchal and male-chauvinist gender relations is not a question of "development"; it cannot be projected as a problem that is external to Europe or only pertains to "others." It is an effect and symptom of domination relations that are fundamental to capitalist and bourgeois societies. In Germany one woman is killed or attempted to be killed every day by her partner. According to police crime statistics, 149 women were killed by their husband or ex-partner in 2016, and 208 women survived a murder attempt with life-threatening injuries. In official language these femicides are called *Beziehungstaten* ['relationship acts']. The statistics only count killings in the context of romantic relationships, and the media, in an even more depoliticizing way, often refer to "family tragedies." There is a lack of more exact statistics on bodily injuries and rapes that result in death outside of the domestic sphere, and official statistics for murders of and violence against trans*women and women* subject to multiple kinds of discrimination.[18] In the German-speaking countries, femicides are not discussed in politics or in the media as an expression of structural, gender-specific power assemblages; murders of women* are considered to be mere problems of certain social strata or other nationalities. In Austria, too, more exact statistics are missing, but it has long been known that violence against women* is usually perpetrated by a familiar person and not by a stranger. As far as statistics do exist, there

were more femicides in the context of romantic relationships in Austria than in Spain between 2012 and 2015.[19]

In the autumn of 2018, there are considerable indications for much stronger organizing efforts and mobilizations than in previous years.[20] References are being made to the last large women's strike in Germany, on March 8, 1994. Already then, women* were working with an expanded understanding of the strike and of labor, and already then the strike was directed against cuts of social benefits, increasing poverty and environmental destruction.[21]

Departing from violence against women* as an expression of structural violence, the structural devaluation of care and reproduction, economic and sociopolitical domination relations of discrimination, exclusion, and deportation means to always understand the current feminist struggles, which include alliances of so many movements and initiatives, as intersectional and transversal struggles. This is the value of the strike as a transnational feminist tool, which is open to a multitude of actors*, not only women*, but also to precarious and migrant workers. The transnational feminist strike wave is directed against racism, against closed borders and exclusive nationalisms, against military, extreme-rightwing and populist masculinisms, against the exploitative relations of neoliberal capitalist and against the "anti-genderism" promoted not least by the Vatican and the Catholic Church.[22] These are giant demonstrations in which millions participate, and which are unfolding a monstrous new feminist and queer power worldwide, a forceful wave that can overflow everything.

In the words of Rubia Salgado, from her talk at a recent Thursday demonstration against the neoliberal, extreme-rightwing, populist Austrian government at the beginning of October 2018 in Vienna:

“And me and we there, where we move every day, we Queers Feminists Migrants and Refugees, who managed to arrive here, we are here despite of the daily pain that marks our everyday life, despite being spat at in the bus, despite the insults, despite harassment, despite deportation, despite reduced guaranteed minimum income, despite fear, despite mouldy apartments, despite racism in the street, by the authorities, in hospitals and schools, despite racist, murderous migration policies, despite the pessimism of the intellect we move with optimism of the will, we move in confrontation, in struggle for a better life for all, here, everywhere and now.

Yes, optimism!

They won’t silence us, they won’t destroy us. They are desperate, because we are powerful, because non-conformity is much more common than they wish or could imagine, because our worlds are much more joyful and powerful than their narrow world of conservative and reactionary values, because the politics of marginalisation, of humiliation, of exploitation had to stumble upon us. We won’t let them destroy our achievements.”[23]

Berlin, October 2018

8M - Der große feministische Streik
Konstellationen des 8. März
Verónica Gago, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Susana Draper, Mariana Menéndez Díaz, Marina Montanelli, Marie Bardet / Suely Rolnik
Aus dem Spanischen von Michael Grieder und Gerald Raunig
Mit einem Vorwort von Isabell Lorey
transversal texts, November 2018
https://transversal.at/books/8m

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[1] The renewed impetus for the protests was the murder of 14-year old Chiara Paez, who was pregnant, brutally hit and buried alive, and found dead shortly later in the house of her 16-year old boyfriend.

[2] In Peru the initiative NiUnaMenos mobilized the largest march in Peruvian history on August 13, 2016. In Lima alone, 150,000 people took to the streets against violence against women and against the judiciary that was favoring offenders in its decisions (https://larepublica.pe/sociedad/963798-la-mas-grande-de-la-historia).

[3] The strike consisted of a one-hour break from work and study; the strikers were dressed in mourning on this "black Wednesday" (Miércoles negro).

[4] The Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato has called attention to the colonial imaginary conjured by the impalement, the actualization of colonial violence, not least as the offense took place on the evening before Columbus Day. The collective consciousness is exorcized on female bodies, Verónica Gago explains. ("Argentina's Life-and-Death Women's Movement." Interview, in: *Jacobin*, 7. March 7, 2017, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/argentina-ni-una-menos-femicides-women-strike/).

[5] A week later a protest was held in Brazil. In Poland, after sustained protests of mostly women, the parliament rejected the proposal of an ultra-conservative citizens' initiative to make the abortion law, already the strictest in Europe, more severe – with a

large majority. The conservative PiS government had first supported the proposal, but it changed its position due to the protests.

[6] See the call published in *The Guardian* "Women of America: we're going on strike. Join us so Trump will see our power," by Linda Martín Alcoff, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser, Barbara Ransby, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Rasmea Yousef Odeh and Angela Davis (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/06/women-strike/trump-resistance-power).

[7] Ibid.

[8] On further worldwide actions and demonstrations see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/international-womens-day-women-close-schools-occupy-farms-and-go-on-strike.

[9] In Turkey the largest demonstrations of non-government-loyalists in many years took place March 8, 2017 and 2018. In Ireland, inspired by the large protests in Poland on October 2016, tens of thousands protested in many cities on International Women's Strike Day with the motto "Strike 4 Repeal" for the abolition of the rigid abortion law, which banned abortion under almost all conditions. After further protests on March 8, 2018 and the referendum on May 25, 2018, the law was reformed to legalize abortion in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. In South Korea, also inspired by the success of Polish women*, the massive "black protest" for the abolition of the abortion law and for reproductive self-determination has been sustained since October 2016.

[10] See Gago, "Argentina's Life-and-Death Women's Movement."

[11] These mothers of people killed by the military dictatorship have struggled against state terrorism since 1977.

[12] On the genealogies of the feminist strike movement in Italy and the multiple alliances against violence and femicide that led to a demonstration in Rome with 200,000 participants on November 26, 2016, the largest in years, see Paola Rudan: "The Strike that Made a Difference," in *Critical Times*, Nr. 1 (2018), pp. 241-246 (see also further texts on the transnational feminist strike in this issue). On the next day more than 2,000 people gathered again to discuss how the protest should continue. On March 8, 2017 over 60 Italian cities participated in the worldwide women's strike. Like NiUnaMenos, the Italian initiative Non Una di Meno also expanded the protest to struggle against the entire neoliberal order.

[13] For an inspiring book on this topic, see Silvia Federici: *Caliban and the Witch.* Autonomedia 2004.

[14] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," trans. Patrick Lavin. Marxist Educational Society of Detroit 1925 [orig. 1906]. Online at https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm.

[15] Women from at least nine countries participated in the organization: from Spain, Italy, Ireland, India, Peru, Haiti, USA, Guyana, and Haiti.

[16] Precarias a la deriva: *Was ist dein Streik? Militante Streifzüge durch die Kreisläufe der Prekarität*. transversal texts 2004, 109. (Translated here from the German with reference to similar language found in: Precarias a la deriva, "A very careful strike," online at: http://www.commoner.org.uk/11deriva.pdf.)

[17] Although the conservative parties, the governing Partido Popular and the rightwing-liberal Ciudadanos, expressed their opposition to the strike, 82% of people in Spain believed there were good reasons to strike, according to a representative poll.

[18] The EU has demanded more detailed statistics, but many countries, including Germany and Austria, do not fully comply.

[19] *Der Standard* from April 8, 2018: "Mehr Morde an Frauen in Familien."

[20] See, among other things, the September 2018 issue of *LuXemburg*, "Am fröhlichsten im Sturm – Feminismus." Pdf online (including a similar, feminism-themed English-language issue, "Breaking Feminism") at https://www.zeitschrift-luxemburg.de/.

[21] For more on this, see Gisela Notz: "Wir wollen Brot und Rosen," in *Ada Magazin*, September 23, 2018, https://adamag.de/frauen-streik-1994-wir-wollen-brot-und-rosen.

[22] See "Fünf Warnungen von Papst Franziskus zur Gender-Ideologie" of 2015-2016, published by the Catholic News Agency (CNA) in December 2016, https://de.catholicnewsagency.com/story/funf-warnungen-von-papst-franziskus-zur-gender-ideologie-1391; see also Sabine Hark und Paula-Irene Villa (Eds.): *Anti- Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2015.

[23] The full text of Salgado's talk, translated into English by Niki Kubaczek, is online at https://transversal.at/blog/if-you-want-samba.