‘CARIBBEAN WOMEN AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY’
Race Today Women, April 1975

Five black women hospital ancillary workers were elected by their fellow workers as part of the negotiating team to represent them in government talks in the recent pay beds dispute at Westminster Hospital, London. Their presence confounded many. From a hostile white public came a racist backlash in the form of hundreds of abusive letters, and a bomb. More importantly, their presence shows that a new stage has been reached in the struggle of West Indian women in Britain and smashes the myth that this generation of West Indian women do not participate in militant action. The following is part of an interview with one of those women. It is clear from her confident manner that she feels an equal to those government representatives, and is in no way intimidated by them. In short, it is the expression of a woman who, for centuries, has had to be subservient because she has always had to evaluate the needs of others before she could consider her own:

The dispute arose when, because of a shortage of staff, management decided to close 48 beds in NHS wards while all the private wards remained open. We auxiliaries went on a work-to-rule in protest against that decision. Eight of us met with government representatives, five of us were West Indian women. I went to negotiate and sat and heard what the other side had to say. I had to tell one of them that I was not fighting for money but for my people out there. I asked him how he would feel if he fell ill and could not get a bed at the hospital because none was available. He mumbled something and I warned him not to talk to me at the back of his teeth. ‘Speak up and say what you have to say’, I said to him. I give as much as I get. They were forced to compromise and 14 NHS beds were kept open.
My first experience of strike action was in 1972. We did not stay out very long. We wanted more money. At that time we worked in the hospital scrubbing and cleaning. You came to work at 7.00 a.m. and went home at midday, back again at 2.00 p.m. and left at 7.00 p.m. and at the end of the week you had £10 in your hand. It was a wonderful experience striking. We marched and shouted. From 1972 to today, we have had to fight for everything we have since won. Now we no longer work the split shift but we work harder than before because after 1974, they introduced the bonus system – where before there were four of us to a ward, now there are only two. We have problems with patients and doctors alike. I had to threaten to throw water over a doctor the other day. She said to me, ‘You don’t talk to doctors like that.’ I told her she was only a woman and she must learn some manners.

The nurses were all against us in 1972, but when they came out in 1974, they wanted us to support them. We didn’t bother about them. Now they see that we are getting what we want, some of them are trying to join our union, NUPE. They come to our meetings and say what they have to say and if we think it’s all right then we tell them they can join. If it’s not all right then we tell them they can’t join. There are spies, because a lot of them go off and tell their union, (RCN) what we have to say and then the trouble starts. To me, the nurses feel that they are with the government and nothing can touch them, while we can be kicked out or kicked around at any time. I know NUPE are against agency nurses but the way I look at it, if in my job I could get more money by joining an Agency, I would do it? It’s not the work I want. I am only lending my labour for the money. So if I can lend my labour to something to get more money, I would. I think it’s useful to be in the union now, especially in this hospital, ’cause if it was not for the union then a lot of us would suffer. Although we have this union, with the chair, the secretary, stewards and so on, we have to be on our toes all the while, ’cause the management tries to cut you in every way they can. But once they find out that we are not stupid then they don’t bother.

These black women are representatives of that section of West Indian people who came to Britain during the early years of immigration. They came as part of a defeated and demoralised section of the Caribbean working class, to a hostile country, to do the worst jobs with the lowest wage. Beginning in this country with little but themselves, these women have been crucial in laying the foundations of the black community as we know it today. Their capacity to fight is not a phenomenon new to their presence in Britain, but is a continuation of their struggle in the Caribbean. Their rebellion in the workforce in Britain has not always been seen, although it has been central to the trends of rebellion currently being shown in all areas of the health service.

**Anti-colonial Struggle**

Under colonialism in the Caribbean, those women in the lower middle class and the working class who could get employment worked as teachers, nurses, in the sugar industry, as domestic servants and seamstresses, and washing and ironing for white colonials and the black middle class. A large number of women were employed in
agricultural work and ‘petty trading’ – selling whatever surplus produce they could glean from the land at the markets. Male unemployment was extensive and in many cases the money earned by the women was the only source of income for a family.

The population saw the presence of the British as the central cause of their condition and in the hope of a brighter future, women threw themselves into the independence movements whose leaders promised a better deal if they were put in power. Their activities were instrumental in defeating British colonialism and in bringing to power the working-class leaders of these movements, e.g., Bustamante in Jamaica and Eric Gairy in Grenada.

Women were the organisational backbone of the political parties. They formed their own sections within them. All the administrative work fell on their shoulders. They organised meetings, rallies, went on demonstrations, and entered into physical fights if anyone spoke against their particular leaders. They were used also as leading spokeswomen to win over support from other sections. In Trinidad in the early ’50s, the women’s auxiliary of the Oil Field Workers’ Trades Union was formed. Women were leading speakers because they were free to speak out against employers where the workers themselves could not. Daisy Crick, a founder member of this organisation, later became a leading spokeswoman for the People’s National Movement, Trinidad.

In Grenada, Gairy was able to find out the views and plans of the British colonial administration by using the network of domestic workers who worked in their homes. These white men and women were so contemptuous of black women that they would discuss political affairs in front of them, never believing that they were capable of comprehending the significance of what was being said.

In Guyana, in 1953 (pre-independence), the party manifesto of the PPP demanded that the position of domestic workers be addressed. They did so not because they were sympathetic, but because the struggle of the domestic workers haunted every single political formation. Support was essential if woman’s votes were to be won. A committee was appointed under Jesse Burnham to look into the conditions of employment of domestic workers who were getting a very low wage and no time off. Women particularly in Georgetown were active on the issue of rents. They staged a demonstration demanding that the Governor look into the malpractices of landlords, high rents and security of tenure. They were met by mounted police, tear-gassed and beaten. At the same time, women’s groups were formed in both the rural areas and towns; they raised issues particular to themselves and discussed the position and political activities of women all over the world.

**Pitfalls of Nationalism**

After the British had been driven out and these leaders came to power, the real political complexion of the leadership became clear as the leaders compromised with Britain and America to further exploit the national resources of their countries – bauxite, oil, sugar, asphalt and also people. Large-scale unemployment was the order of the day; all the hopes and aspirations of the people betrayed.

None felt this betrayal as much as the women. The little that was gained by the population did not include them. The administrative jobs that became vacant with the departure of the British were filled by middle-class men and a minority of
women. Those industries that came were primarily assembly industries and clothing industries, but never on a scale large enough to absorb the mass of women. They were the chief source of labour for this work, but the intense competition for the few jobs available kept wages very low.

The Flight to Britain

The migration of working-class men and women began in the early 1950s. During the years following the Second World War, the British economy developed two distinct features. There was a shortage of indigenous labour, and an expanding economy meant that the native workforce could begin to bargain more successfully for the terms of their employment and where that employment might be. It meant also that a huge injection of labour was needed to fill these areas and thus undermine the fight of British workers. In other words, capital’s plan aimed at killing two birds with one stone: to use the defeat of the West Indian working class to undermine the gains of workers in the metropolis, and to get some cheap labour at the same time.

Black workers were recruited into those sections of industry requiring cheap unskilled labour, and in service industries. Their arrival in Britain was greeted with extreme hostility by white workers and in the late ’50s the two fought running battles in Nottingham and London. West Indian women were especially suited to fill these two areas because of their experience in their countries of origin. Service work was something that every black woman was familiar with, from slavery to colonialism and they had constantly rebelled against it. The factories which employed them were food factories (Lyons had its own recruiting facilities in the Caribbean), shoe factories, garment factories and unskilled assembly lines. Because the wages they received were so desperately low, they supplemented it by taking home ‘out-work’ – machining at home for which they were paid on a piece-work basis.

Many of them came as independent workers leaving their families behind. Some were recruited directly in the West Indies, some heard of jobs through friends who had gone before them, some found jobs for themselves on arrival. They came to Britain with nothing but themselves, no material goods – but brought the tradition of rebellion and resistance they had fashioned in the womb of colonial society. For the majority of them, it was the first time they had engaged in wage labour in a modern industrial economy. They worked long hours for little pay. The average wage was around £6 per week, compared to white women who during the same period were receiving an average wage of £8 a week. They not only maintained themselves and the children they might have with them, in food, rent and clothing, but maintained also their children and relatives in the Caribbean.

Ninety-eight per cent of the children of Jamaican women were left behind when they came to England, and between 1961 and 1963 some £22 million was sent back to Jamaica. A survey taken in Nottingham in 1965 showed that 85 per cent of West Indian women were sending money back home. They lived a one-room existence in houses often shared by several other immigrant men and women. To find accommodation as a black person was no easy task and most houses carried signs saying ‘No blacks here’. Facilities such as irons and radios were shared and women cooked not only for themselves but for those men in the houses who were single. Their major preoccupation was to earn enough money to provide a stable situation into which
they could bring their children.

What follows are some of the experiences of Jamaican families who were interviewed in 1962 about their lives in Britain.

**Mr and Mrs Davis**

When the money for the fare to England arrived from Mrs Davis’s husband, she was sick, desperate, and she spent it on other things. He refused to send her any more. Although she had six children, and a mother to care for, she worked in Jamaica until she had saved up the remainder. She had been working for 15 years as a maid and felt that if only she could go to England for six years or so and then return she could make good. The six children were left with their grandmother in Jamaica and Mrs Davis joined her husband in England. Her first experience of work here was in a button factory ‘It’s a button factory, drilling and wrapping parcels. I knew someone working there; she told me about a vacancy and I went and asked. They pay me £4.17 less tax. I went to many places before I got this. I saw one job in a paper, when I got there they said the vacancy had gone and the next day I saw it in the paper. There were no coloured there, pure white. That is why they wouldn’t take me, pure white.’

Mr Davis earns £12 a week and their weekly expenditure reads like this:

- £3. 15s. On rent
- £1 1s. 6d gas and oil
- £4. 0s. 0d. to Jamaica
- £3. 0s. 0d. Food
- £1. 7s. 6d. transport £1. 0s. 0d. clothing
- £2. 6s. 0d. baby things, etc.
- £16. 0s. 0d.

Mr Davis said, ‘We have no furniture at all. We stay at home, don’t jump around much, we don’t even have the money at weekend to start anything. Just once in a while we go to church, nothing, no show, nowhere. Can’t afford to lose a shilling. I would like to go back to Ja. but not save a halfpenny, that’s what troubling me now. You see as far as I am concerned I really like Ja. very much, but you know, you see the politician run Ja. into a wreck’.

**Mrs Sylvester**

Mrs Sylvester left her four children aged six, five, four and three in Jamaica with her husband. In London she lives in a small room just large enough to hold a bed, dressing table and wardrobe. She works as a ‘spotter’ in a dry cleaning establishment. She rises at 5.45 every morning to go to work. Working overtime most nights, to earn more money, means she doesn’t get home until 6.30 or 7.00 p.m. The long hours Mrs. Sylvester work earn her £7 a week, but some weeks up to £8 with overtime.

**Cynthia**

Cynthia is 34. In Jamaica she would do any work that came to hand – a little cooking, dressmaking, or helping in the local shop; but it was difficult to obtain regular employment so she decided to come to England. At first she worked washing dishes in a railway cafeteria for less than £5 a week. She then worked inking shoes in a
shoe factory earning nearly £7 until finally she found employment as a domestic help in a hospital earning nearly £8 a week with overtime. She lived in Stoke Newington in a house shared by about eight families. She had met a lot of hostility from white people.: ‘Today, if only I could take a bus home to Ja. I would go. It is because you haven’t got much money, then to make yourself better you have to come, and because people here feel that they have a little whiter skin, that they can take liberties with you.’ She often works three hours overtime to bring her salary up to £7.12 and she puts aside £1 for Ja. each week but saves it for a few weeks as: ‘I can’t send £1 to Ja. looks too cheap.’ She is still paying back the fare she borrowed to get to England in the first place.

The Making of a Community

In one way or another, the vibrancy of the black community today is traceable to the social activities of those black women who arrived here first. Organisations and clubs emerged to give a scattered community a sense of identity here. As in the West Indies, the Church became an important vehicle for looking after the welfare of the community. Women not only formed the majority of its congregation but organised social activities such as outings, dances, meetings. In those early years, these activities provided the only means whereby working-class black people could come together for relaxation and entertainment in what was otherwise an intolerably isolated existence.

Later these clubs were to form the basis for the first national organisation of black people in Britain: CARD (Campaign Against Racial Discrimination). The women were never mentioned, for it was primarily the men who did the talking, but they carried out the essential administrative donkey work necessary to keep the organisation alive and intact, as they had done in political and social organisations in the Caribbean.

Since the British government did not increase expenditure on its social services to deal with this new addition to the workforce – i.e., provision of housing, nurseries, adequate schooling, etc. – the entire burden of servicing black labour rested with the women. In the absence of child-care facilities, the women had to create their own. Many West Indian mothers who were unable to work because they had young children, undertook the burden of childminding. In the late ’60s when the community mobilised against the large numbers of their children being channelled into ESN schools, educationalists and social workers avoided responsibility by putting the blame on the mothers for working and using childminders. The racism of the social services meant that only direct action from the black community would result in changes of policy. This is clearly shown in the area of council housing, where the policy of the authorities was either to give no house at all or to allocate those houses which were in the worst conditions.

In 1970, Merle Major from Trinidad, after a number of years waiting to be rehoused by the council, was the first black woman to squat with her children in council property in Notting Hill. Within days, the council made her an offer. Today, squatting is widespread in the black community.

In the home, the mothers constantly impressed upon their children that they had to get something better for themselves, that they should not go through what their par-
ents had to. Education was seen by parents as a way of guaranteeing a better future for their children and much of the militant activity by women has been around ensuring this. When they saw that the schools their children were attending were ‘dustbin’ schools, they were instrumental in setting up supplementary schools in black communities up and down the country – Birmingham, Nottingham, London and Leeds. (In London, one such school has been named after a black mother, Albertina Sylvester, who was crucial in its organisation.) They also campaigned against the racist policies and practices of the education authorities. In 1968 in Haringey, they stopped the banding scheme which was an attempt to channel black children into ‘special’ schools under the pretext of attending to their disadvantages. In Chapeltown Leeds in 1973, black mothers sustained the campaign against conditions in Cowper Street school and its racist headmaster. As part of the campaign, they withdrew their children from the school. Faced with this, the authorities promised better conditions and removed its headmaster.

**New Development**

By the late ’60s and early ’70s, the immigrant workforce here began to feel strong enough to confront their employers openly. The strength to do so came from the strong communities they had established and from the rebellion of black people that was taking place internationally, particularly in the United States and Africa. For immigrant women employed by the NHS, it meant that they could qualitatively change their form of rebellion and we see them now at the vanguard of bringing the strike weapon to the NHS.

**Immigrant Workers – The Unions**

Whenever immigrant workers in this country have moved in their own interest they have not only had to fight management but also the unions, which have often not only refused to support them but have actively opposed collective action taken by groups of black workers. It is only when workers have organised themselves independently that the unions have rushed in, eager to recruit and to control that action.

West Indian women have not only had to face the racism of the unions but have also had their interests as women ignored. In the auxiliary strike of 1972 and again in the nurses’ strike of 1974, the unions gained thousands of new members, mostly women in whom they previously had no interest. Their opportunism was clear for all to see. However, when black women tried to raise issues specific to them they were told that this was not what the union was for:

We haven’t raised the question of discrimination because at our first meeting it was said it wasn’t a meeting for that. I joined the union COHSE since the strike for protection. I have been to two meetings, one at the Maudsley and the other at Bethlem, and the things Mr Spanswick told us were different from what he said on the television. ‘STRIKE’, he said to us, and when I saw him on the television he said that he thinks that nurses are dedicated and that if they walk out on patients they would lose their reputation. (Nursing assistant in a psychiatric hospital)
The Second Generation

Young black women are today continuing the traditions of rebellion handed down from their mothers and grandmothers. Not only do they draw on the experience of their mothers but also of those hundreds of young women who participated in the Black Power organisations in Britain during the late '60s. This rebellion is characterised by open confrontation with the police, against school authorities and employers, and indeed within their own families, all of whom have been unable to contain them. Their boldness stems from their never having experienced the bitterness of defeat as their mothers once had. Violent clashes between mother and daughter often ensue, as the push for independence from one conflicts with the aspirations of the other. As a result, hundreds of young black women are in hostels provided by the state.

Sociologists, psychologists, police and community relations workers are eager to blame this on black mothers ‘not caring’ enough, and advance spurious arguments about the breakdown of the black family. This is an attack on the black woman who as we have shown has always had to carry the burden of the black family. What distinguishes this rebellion of young black women from their mothers is that they know what is available now in Britain and want it without having to be wage slaves. The seeds of this rebellion were sown in the homes where they have witnessed at first hand what the lives of their mothers have been and what they themselves have had to say about it: ‘My mother is a ticket collector for London Transport. She’s in a lift all day just collecting tickets. When she comes home she is always tired, saying I won’t encourage anyone to work at London Transport’ (18–year-old West Indian woman).

But for the parents, the activities of the young refusers of work seem to be in opposition to everything they have fought so hard to achieve:

If I had my daughter here and I told her to go out and work for honest bread, and she refused, I would ask her, ‘Which is better – to go on the street or work for her honest bread?’ Don’t get me wrong, if she has the education and she can find a job, then that’s all right with me. But suppose she can’t find a job – what would you do? I would prefer to do what I am doing now than going on the street and robbing, and I don’t want social security cause they have to go into too much of my private life and my private life is my private life.

Sometimes it makes me mad to go on the street and see the young people, the things that they are carrying on ‘cause it makes me ashamed to be in England. Young people if they have the education, and came out of school and can’t find a job, should not let the police manhandle them on the street, because don’t forget, the way they handle the white youth they are not going to handle a black youth. They bash them about. Before they come into conflict with the police, if it’s even to sweep the street just for the money, then they should accept. I am truly sorry for the young people of today. Some of them turn around and don’t appreciate what their parents have done for them. They abuse the parents and it makes me mad because it’s my own colour. The way the police treat them is disgusting. I take my own eyes and see. They walk down the street and the first black one they can see they pick on. (Member of the Westminster Hospital negotiating team)
It is not that they are against young people refusing to do the work that their parents were forced to do. They oppose the alternative activity practised by the youth because it makes them vulnerable to attacks by the police. The weakness of their situation stems from the lack of a regular wage and the discipline that goes with getting one. The fact that a number of them have young children means that they suffer also the powerlessness of being a housewife.

Mugging, shoplifting, and other such activities are all manifestations of powerlessness. We do not believe that as an alternative these young sisters should be told to work in a factory, for London Transport, or to clean hospital floors. Rather they should receive a social wage. What the state has so far been forced to give in the form of urban aid in response to the rebellion of blacks shows that the money is available and the demand a possibility.

From receiving either no wage at all in the West Indies, or at best an irregular one, to receiving a regular wage under the discipline of a modern industrial economy in the metropolis has given older West Indian women an access to power previously denied to them. Although the West Indian community here is relatively new (25 years old) those women on the NUPE negotiating team have shown that they are now ready to begin to exercise that power. If any event is to be celebrated in this so-called International Women’s Year, then surely this must be it.