

Account of Halinka Augustin and Monika Gärtner-Engel to the European Conference on 7.1.2012 in Germany

Dear women, dear delegates, dear guests!

A warm welcome to the first European Conference after the World Women's Conference of rank-and-file women!

Today's Conference takes place in exciting times, in which the **international militant women's movement has taken a further leap forward and is facing fierce struggles** since the first World Women's Conference of rank-and-file women. Just a few highlights from the last months:

31.10. – Japan: 200 women from Fukushima had commenced a three-day long sit-in in front of the Ministry of Economics, which encouraged 10.000 people to demonstrate for the irrevocable shut-down of nuclear reactors, swift decontamination of the region and evacuation of children.

08.11. - Germany: Kurdish women occupied the headquarter of the arms manufacturer Rheinmetall in Düsseldorf to protest against the German support of the war of the Turkish government against the Kurdish population. One of their demands was to stop the arms supply to Turkey. Police acted against them.

11.11. – Pakistan: 800 women working in the state-owned health care sector ragingly blocked a street and accused the regional government for failing to pay their wages for four months, thus making their children starve. It was the first time that women from the state's family planning program organized a public protest.

12.11. - Kenia: Female flower workers go on strike to oppose sexual harassment by their superiors. Primarosa flower plantation locked the workers out. The management dismisses shop stewards, that stepped in for the interests of the workers, without notice. Workers who got ill, too. The women on strike demanded appropriate workwear as well.

14.11. - South Korea: 51 years-old South-Korean unionist Kim Jin Suk ended her crane occupying at heights of 35 meters after 309 days. She had started on 6 January as a protest against the lay-off of 400 employees of South-Korean shipyards. 1100 female and male workers had been on strike. Kim ended her protest after the enterprise had declared to reinstate 94 of the laid-off workers on strike.

19.11. - Yemen: A growing number of women joins the resistance against the dictatorial regime. After the assassination of three women and children by governmental troops, thousands of women burned their black burkas (whole body veils) in protest on 26 October. Now we show our faces, so that the world may see us when we are bound to die“, an activist said. Women held banners saying „Butcher Saleh“, in whoms eyes „women were worth nothing“.

20th December –Egypt: On December 20, ten thousand women demonstrate in Kairo and demand the military council's resignation. Women of different age, heritage, religion, from secular women to women with headscarf – all are outraged about the abuse of women by soldiers during the repression and oppression of the protests the days before. Still during the demonstration, the military council had to admit abuses had taken place and was forced to promise to punish the culprits.

25th December – Day for the elimination of violence against women: activities in many countries around the globe, in Asia, Europe, North- and South America.

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It is time ... to unite with the perspective of building a society without exploiters and those exploited. We, the women and men of all continents, want to be the beneficiaries of our own creative power! (quoted from the call) This was the basic idea of the first **World Women's Conference of rank-and-file women** 2011 in Venezuela. From 4th – 8th March 2011, this first World Women's Conference of rank and file women took place!

For it's preparation, we – Halinka Augustin from the Netherlands and Monika Gärtner-Engel from Germany – were elected as **European initiators** on the first European Conference on 1

June 2009. With this report we want to **account** for our work.

It was our **task** to promote the process of the World Women's Conference in Europe, to find cooperation and coordinate the Europe-wide cooperation in the preparation process. Furthermore, we were supposed to take part in meetings of the international initiator's committee to ensure a reasonable preparation and to inform about the results of and our positions on these meetings.

With this task we **broke new ground!**

In 1995 the UNO ceased their Women Conference – after the collateral forum of non-government organizations had been visited best by 40,000 women and girls at the last conference in Beijing. In this forum the women's cooperated and discussed surely of course a lot more critically and militantly than the official government representatives. Although the situation of women worldwide had improved technically – the social reality had rather worsened dramatically.

Worldwide the independently organized women's movement had big problems in the last years, declined at times - but there was also a certain new beginning.

We declare: **The first conference from 4th to 8th March in Caracas, Venezuela, was a great success!**

1500 **participants** attended the conference, 3000 were present at the great final demonstration on 8th March! They came from four continents, 43 countries, represented women from more than 90 organizations, initiatives, trade unions, parties and movements – among them alone 56 various women organizations. The conference was totally self-organized and self-financed.

60 brigadiers mainly from Germany and the Netherlands and about 150 assistants from various countries expressed the **international enthusiasm and responsibility**.

The conference took a clear **political stand**; it made clear decisions on the future cooperation and further World Women's Conferences.

It was **militant, anti-imperialist, many-sided regarded women's politics and competent, colorful and lively**. This became evident in its two pillars, the general assembly and the mass program with talleres on 10 different topics of women's politics, in the culture of the conference, the evening event and at the demonstration on the occasion of 8th March.

Apart from these great successes there was a whole series of restrictions: the mass participation in Venezuela was much lower than expected, there were some grave problems in the culture of debate up to undemocratic behaviour and partly organizational chaos.

Nevertheless the success of the WWC is **historically unique** – a beginning for a coordinated cooperation of the women of the world! It was achieved without an apparatus with full-time women or financial support from a third party – independently by the militant world women's movement. All activists and the initiators of the World Women's Conference are real **rank-and-file women**, having a job and being committed to the women's movement in their countries.

Our work as European initiators **has actively contributed to this success and to a critical-self-critical handling of conflicts as well as a democratic culture of debate**. In all countries it was a new experience to prepare a world women's conference with rank-and-file women. They have learned a lot about the proper culture of debate and fought for enabling a democratic culture of debate. Two Europe conferences in 2009 and 2010 took place in which women from 14 countries participated. By the common work women from 20 European countries altogether learned about the World Women's Conference and were partly an active part of it.

As European initiators we took part in four worldwide **Initiators' meetings**: in March and November 2009, in September 2010 and in February 2011. In addition we initiated the international cooperation in about 15 meetings via chat for the immediate preparation of the conference.

As **brigadistas**, we both were actively involved in the preparation and evaluation three weeks before the beginning and two days after the conference – and publicized
During the world women's conference we actively worked for **realization** – by participating in the conducted meetings of initiators, in presiding the discussions, interim evaluations, presentation, ...

We also played an active part in the evaluation of the conference by a series of lectures on its results, newspaper reports and international correspondence. Halinka has carried out about 5 and Monika has carried out about 15 events in Germany with about 600 participants altogether. Various regional and nationwide newspapers reported on the world women's conference and it was further propagated via the home page. Via mail and visits of international conferences like the Women's Congress in Argentina 2010 and the IWA in Manila 2011 the World Women's Conference was publicized.

In this we could learn from the **women of the International Initiators Committees**:

... from the women from **Asia**:

Joly Talukder from Bangladesh brought us the untiring fighting spirit of the women textile workers for their future! She is a leading rank-and-file trade unionist, actively involved in the worldwide clean clothes campaign, an activist of the strike of 3 million young textile workers in summer 2010.

By Joan Salvador from the Philippines we learned the organizational and developed mass work of the women of Gabriela with 120,000 women members – known for example by the purple rose campaign against forced prostitution and traffic with girls.

... from the women of **Africa**:

Clariste Soh-Moube from Mali taught us patience and endurance, not to be disappointed in case of difficulties. She's a collaborator of Aminata Traoré, well-known former Minister of Education in Mali, and active in the movement of the Word Social Forum, among other things in Dakar.

From Gloria and Bulelwa we learned about the illegal struggle of the South African women under the apartheid and the new beginning since its end as well as about the struggle against AIDS.

... from the women of **South America**:

representative for many young women of Ana-Soto who partly gave up their jobs, in order take on the preparation and holding of the conference in their country as very young organization, there is Dilia M.

Women like Celia from Argentina did untiringly women's and political work since the brutal times of the military dictatorship, under the most complicated conditions and having a backbone.

From Cecilia Jaramillo we learned from her manifold experiences in the developed work among women of Confemec in Ecuador as a real mass rank-and-file movement of most different women.

... from the women from the **Middle East**:

Lena from Turkey and Melike from Kurdistan are examples for the long-standing courageous and selfless struggle for national and social liberation and the liberation of women under the most difficult conditions and daily danger to life. Presently they organize protest actions against the massacre in Roboski and extend to us cordial greetings, to which we absolutely should reply in a resolution today!

Thus the cooperation in the International Initiators Committee was productive, enriching and instructive. However, there were also **bitter disputes** which seriously endangered the successful outcome of the World Women's Conference.

Thus the work on the commonly elaborated foundations of the basic documents and the adopted decisions was again and again called into question. This began with the always repeated calling into question of the general assembly and one had to hold long discussions about the question that the early adopted worldwide extension of the Initiators Committee really became reality. Many women criticized an unacceptable claim to leadership of the "original

initiators”.

We insisted on the adherence to our documents and principles, fought for that with many arguments and personal activities. For the future we think it is unacceptable and will not participate, if in the process of the preparation the commonly adopted documents are again and again called into question or its legitimacy is questioned. We reject the artificially constructed competition between **general assembly** and mass program, by which there is too little room for the general assembly. We would like to take up the proposal from Portugal to hold the general assembly and the workshops not in competition, but one after another – for example first two days workshop (in which also the delegates can participate), then two days general assembly.

An urgently needed multilateral organizational committee in the run-up, and on to the 6th meeting of initiators was prevented a few days before the World Women's Conference. Yet it corresponded to the character of the conference and the knowledge was urgently needed!

What followed was organizational **chaos**, creating many contradictions. Without the selfless work of the members of the brigades, their discipline and readiness, to collaborate with the partners in Venezuela in solidarity despite of all, the conference would have sunk in disaster without exaggeration.

In future we insist from the outset on the planning of a multilateral organizational committee on equal basis for the preparation and holding of the conference, will fight even more actively against any defamatory treatment of activists.

Also the role of the **government** was complicated. In part we had the support, like from Chávez and the Minister for Education Cordoba. However, there were also counterforces! After the resignation of Maria Leon the new Minister for Women's Affairs Perez refused every meeting on the conference for months and forbid their collaborators to cooperate with us. She stood in a line with the Foreign Minister Nicolas Madura, who refused help in case of any visa problems.

There was also strong opposition from **IDFF**, which considers the international militant women's movement as its sovereign territory. It organized an international campaign, and as a result of it representatives of various organizations abandoned their participation in the preparation. The motive was obviously fear of dwindling influence – in spite of expressive invitation to cooperation from our part.

On both problems – in the consequence of which also a series of women's organizations from Venezuela left the preparation – we were not informed by the hostesses. Thus severe mistakes were made in the cooperation, but also in the lacking necessary, critical discussion. Future hostesses have to be selected, also by whether they are ready for a multilateral preparatory work on an equal basis and give full publicity on the problems and difficulties.

At the World Women's Conference itself, criticism was suppressed, a democratic discussion was prevented and the problems in the holding of the conference were not sufficiently publicized by some initiators. Such mistakes in the leadership finally contributed to the departure of the Kurdish women and the turning away of the Serbian women. Every time we took a clear stand here within the International Initiator's Committee, but should have addressed more courageously all women from Europe and given publicity to that.

The adopted principle of consensus was distorted to a method of pushing through minority views, because votings were not allowed.

In future we will give full publicity on differences of opinions.

We will not take part in an almost dictatorially distorted **principle of consensus**. This holds back the progress and the women's movement! Every time when we thought that something has been arranged, it was called into question again. We insist on votings and clear formation of opinion and the right to take part in the discussion as regards the contents within the framework of clear rules as members of the presidium.

The World Women's Conference has been achieved by the independent financing and organi-

zation. However, there was a hard struggle for its realization. Again and again the opinion was voiced that in poorer countries no donations could be collected. With that the movements of the oppressed countries would become dependent from those of imperialist countries – this is against the goal of the liberation from exploitation and oppression!

We will further support the work financially to the best of our abilities, but we insist on the principle of financial **independence!**

Despite of all this the **first World Women's Conference** took place– successful, enthusiastic – but there was a hard struggle for it. However, the greatest advances are just in what you struggle hard for, and not in what comes easily to us!

It became clear: There is a **great potential** in the international militant movement of the women of the world, if we join forces, support us each other, coordinate our activities and cooperate in common projects for the liberation of women. The outstanding significance of the first World Women's Conference of rank-and-file women in Venezuela rests on its contribution and its signal for that.

Thus its success rests on the fact that it – even in its preparation – was very important for the **upswing in the militant women's movement** in several countries of Europe.

Since then we have worked variedly in Europe on the basis of the resolution of Caracas and for the **implementation of the adopted decisions:**

* With today's conference, we make an important contribution to the preparation of the next conference 2016.

* With the consolidation of the European-wide cooperation and new contacts we contribute to the international coordination

* We have conducted the three common women's political days on 8th March, 1st May and 25th November in a militant way and festively.

* We will also elect the future coordinators and by that the representatives from Europe for the worldwide committee at this weekend.

We need this successful process and struggle for the implementation of the decisions of the World Women's Conference – for we have strong enemies!

Since 2008, there is the deepest world economic and financial crisis since the beginning of capitalism. For 2012 we have to prepare ourselves for state bankruptcies, bank collapses, possibly also for the breakdown of the entire world financial system, which will result in mass dismissals, cuts of wages and of social gains worldwide.

However, this will increase the rage: The big popular movements for democracy and freedom **bring about turbulences for those in power** even now and open up great possibilities and chances for extending the cooperation and coordination of the women of the world, for learning from each other and for waging commonly and successfully the struggle for the liberation of women.

The world women's movement has experienced an further upswing in the center of these turbulences and revolutionary movements during the last months. It is facing great tasks, but also a **great future!** Let us go on constructing commonly on this big “women's house”! Let us fight jointly in our interests, in the interests of the whole humankind and especially in the interest of the future of the youth for a world without exploitation and oppression and for the liberation of women!