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History of the Women's International

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At the WIDF/FDIM in Windhoek, Namibia. SLL photo: Lizz Toledo

It is not accidental that very little is known in the U.S. about the Women's International Democratic Federation, which was born to fight against the same imperialism that the U.S. leads. On Dec. 1, 1945, right after World War II, women from 41 countries met in France to create the WIDF (FDIM in Spanish). Many of these women had suffered directly from the bloody effects of the war and many had struggled against fascism.

Yolanda Ferrer Gómez, general secretary of the Cuban Women's Federation, gave a moving statement on the organization's history in 2007 at the 14th Congress in

Caracas, Venezuela:

“They were widows, mothers who had lost their children, former prisoners from Nazi concentration camps, combatants who fought alongside men in the battlefields, members of the resistance and clandestine movements, guerrillas, workers who secured the rearguard and supplied the front, fighters all of them in uniform or civilian clothes.”

She continued: “With them, women who had fought in other latitudes against fascism also united, Spanish exiles, members from national organizations from the Americas and Asia, African women, from Arab countries, from Indigenous communities, all in solidarity.”

They pledged: “To defend the economic, political, legal and social rights of women; to fight so that the indispensable conditions for the harmonic and happy development of our children and future generations are built; struggle tirelessly so that all forms of fascism are forever annihilated and establish worldwide a true democracy; fight without rest to assure a lasting peace in the world.”

The WIDF was also enriched by the membership of socialist women from the revolutions that later developed in Cuba and Vietnam. The federation has played a key role in support of national liberation, such as in Angola, and against apartheid in South Africa. It has worked in international forums trying to give a more militant direction and has given voice to those under the yoke of imperialism, from Palestinians to Iraqis.

The WIDF was especially hard-hit during the 1990s, when the disintegration of the USSR and the Eastern and Central European socialist countries meant that material support and great theoretical and practical contributions so instrumental for the functioning of the federation suddenly stopped.

Crucial role of Cuba

Vilma Espín — one of four WIDF vice presidents, a combatant in the Cuban Revolution, a member of the Central Committee and the Political Bureau of the Cuban Communist Party and president of the Cuban Women's Federation — played a decisive role in the enormous task of ensuring the survival and development of the WIDF. Thanks to Cuban action, the federation not only survived but thrived as a space of struggle and promotion of women.

During the WIDF's 13th Congress held in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2002, Marcia Campos from Brazil was elected president. This was the first time a woman from Latin America held that post. She had founded the Confederation of Brazilian Women and is a member of the Central Committee and the National Secretariat of the October 8th Revolutionary Movement in Brazil.

The 14th Congress was held in Venezuela to show solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution. But a new phenomenon occurred. The fighting revolutionary masses who are transforming this region also came to the congress. Many of the organizations present were not yet affiliates of the WIDF, but infused the congress with their combative energy. Wanting to affiliate and move forward the federation, many representatives spoke at the regional work session of the Americas.

There were Indigenous women from the Bolivian Bartolina Sisa Peasant Union, Peruvian Indigenous parliamentarians, young women from Puerto Rico and Colombian women urging a humanitarian exchange of prisoners. Prominent was the participation of Venezuelan women who, as the hosts, worked tirelessly to assure the smooth development of the congress and in their presentations highlighted the important role and advances of women under the Bolivarian Revolution.

The overall experience was tremendous: meeting and sharing with revolutionary women from all over the world, listening to their countries' struggles, and most

importantly, experiencing the overwhelming solidarity among all the attendees and their great respect, admiration and gratitude for Cuban President Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Where else could you hear women from the Sahara thanking Chávez for his support of their cause in international forums? The congress gave the opportunity to interview many women from different struggles who offered their progressive views on crucial current events: the women's role in Angola's MPLA, South Africa after apartheid, Zimbabwe's land distribution, the political view of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the struggle against Plan Colombia and so much more.

The WIDF congress is not simply a "women's issue." As one participant said, "Everything and every struggle is of concern to women; we are half the world and give birth to the other half." It was a Congress of Women in Struggle.

