

Grassroots (*fundamental movements*)**The 1966 women's strike at Fabrique Nationale Herstal****"Women in anger"**

A documentary produced by the RTBF as part of a European television series on social and political movements that have shaped the recent history of the European countries.

Head of documentaries : Wilbur Leguebe(RTBF)

Director : Philippe Delporte

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Belgium, February, 1966. A strike erupts at the FN Herstal arms factory. More than 3,000 women workers at the Fabrique Nationale d'Armes de Guerre down their tools. They will hold out for 3 months. Their demands are straightforward: wage equality between men and women – equal work, equal pay. They demand quite simply the application of the law pursuant to the treaty of Rome of which Belgium was one of 6 signatories. Their strike would spread to other work places and spark a huge movement of solidarity across Europe. The FN women's strike became a symbol of the women's struggle for women, and was as such a European first.

TIME-CODED TEXTS**10.00.21**

April 1966. Several thousand woman workers descend on the city of Liege brandishing the slogan: "Equal work, equal pay". They are on strike and are intent on making it known.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.00.52

Being on strike is being at war... It's just as devastating.

Jenny Magnée

Code :10.00.58

3,800 women leaving like that, all at once, that's something. And they were up in arms.

10.01.09

They are pioneers. They proclaim, hard and long, demands that will be heard all over Europe: "we demand equal treatment with men".

10.01.28

In Europe, the sixties were christened "the golden sixties". In the avenues and byways of fashionable shops, women felt elegant and beautiful. At last they were on show. Young women were coming out. In many domains the image of the women was evolving, but by no means in all.

10.01.50

It is the end of January 1966, in the heights of Liege's metallurgical basin. In Herstal, to be precise, a bastion of Belgian industry. Among its leading-edge factories, La FN.

10.02.29

***FN, "La Fabrique nationale", is an august industrial tradition. It exists since 1886. War arms are produced there: machine guns, ammunition, assault rifles, deluxe hunting arms and even military airplane parts... in short, a complete arsenal!
In 1966, the factory employs 13,000 people, some 4,000 of which are women... almost all blue collar workers.***

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.02.59

Personally, I'm not a feminist. I'll defend women tooth and nail. I'm willing to die for it.
But I'm not a feminist.

10.03.09

These three women were part of this important female work force.

10.03.14

***Jenny... born in 1927, is one of 12 children in her family!
Unimaginable today! She was the tenth. Her story is simple. After the death of her father in 1949, she started at FN. She would spend her whole life there...***

10.03.34

Pina. She is the youngest of the three. She is 17 when she is taken on in the assault weapons workshop. She is Italian. Her father is a miner and her mother also works at FN...

10.03.56

And then Rita. It's the middle of the war when she is hired by Herstal; in 1943 to be precise. Her mother and two aunts work there already. With Jenny and others, she'll be one of the leaders of what will become a historic strike.

10.04.15

The arms factory... It's as if it has always been there. These photos from the early 1900's show the workers dressed in white and as immaculate as nurses. La FN has always been a prosperous factory, a benchmark.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.04.33

It's a factory where people work by generation. If you're born in Herstal, it's the hole you're going to have to enter.

Pina Baiamonte

Code : 10.04.42

You know, there were 7 of us children. My father worked down the mine. So we couldn't make ends meet. So my mother started working. And afterwards she said, okay you come and work with me. So we went for the entrance exam, because you had to be of age. And when we passed the exam, my sister and I were taken on, because my sister was 16. And we started about the same time. We started on the machines.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.05.22 *off*

10.05.26 in

10.05.44 *off*

10.05.57 in

We would get there in the morning, all clean. We had 4 to 6 machines, depending on the part. There were three on one side and three on the other. And we began by starting up the machines... with a rod... and the machines started up as they were belt-driven. One

had to fit the parts into the equipment and close them, sometimes with a hammer, to get it well in.

Jenny Magnée

Code : *10.06.12 off*

10.06.15 in

What used to scare me were the pulleys. I was very afraid of them. I would stay bent over like this all day, looking to see if they weren't going to fall on my head. With time, you get used to the noise.

Pina Baiamonte

Code : *10.06.28 off*

10.06.42 in

I was scared by all those... When I'd look up, there were all those wooden shafts that came down like that and you... you had to start up the machine and touch those shafts. And every time you did that, oil would drip down here. So sometimes we had aprons and the oil dripped down our legs and I, for one, was covered in spots.

Rita Jeusette

Code : *10.06.56 off*

10.07.01 in

We worked with colza oil, and it splattered. And we'd wipe it off. And even if we wore rags, and plastic, and floor cloths, we had oil all down to our bellies.

Pina Baiamonte

Code : *10.07.12 off*

10.07.20 in

When you left at 2 o'clock and took the tram, people would give you funny looks because we gave off a bad smell in the tram. It smelled as if there were petrol. That oil smelled strong. And we were looked down on by others, because they didn't want to ride with us, as if we had the plague or something.

Jenny Magnée

Code : 10.07.32

When we'd get home, we had to strip off everything and wash all our clothes. We were covered in oil all the way to our bellies... all over, all over.

Rita Jeusette

Code : 10.07.57

It killed us. We saw women who'd been picked up from under the machines who'd passed out. Because no matter whether it was hot or cold, there was no limit. So when it was 45 degrees, and you ran the machines, the machines heated up, the oil heated up, the parts were hot, plus the infernal temperature. There were women who couldn't take it... and woops, down they went... into the oil of course, because there was oil everywhere.

Rita Jeusette

Code : 10.08.30 in

10.08.46 off

The process controllers were our chiefs. Then there was the sergeant, then the foremen, then the engineer. So we were crushed by the pyramid, since we were, as they said, *dirty pigs*. *And we'd do well to just stick our heads in our machines and work, work, work.*

Jenny MagnéeCode : *10.08.55 off*

10.09.00 in

They called us the respectful p... Prostitutes in other words... when they left it at that. But in the beginning it hurts. And then you let it go. The more you call them on it, the worse it gets.

10.09.16

They are referred to as the femmes-machines. They wear themselves out for a miserable salary even though the Treaty of Rome provides for equal pay for men and women.

Annie Massay

Code : 10.09.31

The women were truly fed up. Because it had dragged on for years and they were particularly shocked by the indignity of their conditions... less well paid than the sweeper of the yard. That stuck in their throats. They had no chance of promotion to better jobs, even though at 18, boys doing the same work they did moved into groups where they could get qualifications. It was unacceptable, those flat career curves.

10.10.02

At the close of this day on February 15, 1966, no one could have guessed what was in store.

10.10.15

Logbook

February 16th. The three thousand women of the various shop floors did not show up and have stopped work.

Pina Baiamonte

Code : 10.10.23

They were combative women. They started it, and had the machines stopped. And you had to stop. If you didn't stop, they'd have beaten you up.

10.10.36

The women congregated in the factory yard. The "wildcat" strike has taken every one by surprise. At its head, the woman the workers call "la petite Germaine".

Jenny Magnée

Code :10.10.56 in

10.11.02 off

10.11.09 in

She was tiny, but she had this tremendous dynamism. It was incredible. *She was a member of the communist party and brought all the young ones on board with her.* She said, we are going to convoke the union delegates and make a go of it.

Annie Massay

Code :10.11.24 off

10.11.28 in

They set out in concert, all these women, and swept through every group and shop floor. They got everyone behind them and came out in all their fury.

10.11.39

The men observe events without putting much faith in them. Some even ridicule the whole thing.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.11.46

One said: Oh, don't worry about it. The women, they'll kick up a fuss. But in 2 days they'll be glad to be back at work.

And another answered: I'm not so sure. Because when I see the way they've launched into it, I wouldn't want to find myself underfoot. They could tear me to pieces.

Rita Jeusette

Code : 10.12.09 in

10.12.14 off

The director declared: Do as you please. Let them go on strike. But don't let them in, because they do too much damage.

10.12.30

After only two days on strike, a thousand male workers have already been laid off. The management begins to worry.

Annie Massay

Code :10.12.43

It must be said that the management had fought since 1945 to not grant equal pay and conserve a cheap work force. The stakes were high. You can imagine that 3,000 women receiving a 10 franc per hour pay raise would have a serious effect on earnings.

10.13.04

As they are not allowed to enter the factory, the women gather at "the beehive", a movie theatre converted into a headquarters for the occasion. "La petite Germaine" heads the debates.

« La petite Germaine » at the microphone

10.13.21

Comrades, we have gone out on strike all on our own. An unemployed person insulted us by saying the strike hadn't been recognized by the union delegations. It has been recognized.

Annie Massay

Code : 10.13.34 off

10.13.40 in

Things were soaring. There was an atmosphere of both joy and revendication. You could feel that the women were happy to be affirming themselves. They'd come out of their shell, out of the silence and contempt. They were in the front line, and were gratified to see that they were being honored for once.

10.13.57

As for the men, they are excluded from the debates.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.14.05

Ah! They wanted to follow us, but little by little as they... We're with you! No, no, no. This is for us. We don't want men. Stay there. Do what you want. Play cards. Get yourselves laid off. Anything, but stay there. We don't want men.

Jenny Magnée

Code :10.14.25 off

10.14.33 in

They couldn't come into the beehive... none of them. They were out in front. We set up speakers and they heard all we said. So I asked for the floor and I said: I want to thank all the male staff who refused to take our jobs and who chose to be laid off rather than betray us. Thank you all.

And through the door from inside the beehive I heard someone shout: They are pleased. They are pleased.

First Man

Code :10.14.54

Yes, I support the women. Because I consider that a woman doctor earns the same thing as a male doctor and that a woman teacher earns the same as a male teacher. So it is completely normal that a woman in a factory, doing the same job as a man, earns the same thing as a man.

Second Man

Code :10.15.10

I am truly pleased that women are standing up for something that, as I see it, is justified. And, on the European front, I think in future years we can together attain the objectives these women are demanding today.

10.15.25

The women are scoring points. They don't expect to obtain all of their demands; the management would never grant that. But the movement grows, and spreads throughout the whole country.

10.15.41

In other sectors, such as the big stores and other businesses relying on significant female work forces, women mobilize and demonstrate their solidarity.

10.15.54

At FN, talks get nowhere. By early March, more than three thousand workers are out of work.

10.16.06

Logbook

Monday, March 14th, 1966

We are setting up a strike committee to assist those most in need.

10.16.23

Strike pay replaces salaries. The situation for some families is problematical.

Annie Massay

Code :10.16.43 off

10.16.52 in

They were ready for anything. But not all of them. And, through their strike, they dragged their families into poverty. When a whole family worked at FN, and there was nothing left but strike benefit, it wasn't easy. And then, there were all the single women. It was a bit worse for them. In short, there were certainly a few who could have taken it further financially, but not many.

Pina Baiamonte

Code :10.17.09

If the husband worked, okay. But if the husband didn't work, they had problems like anybody else. But I think we were for going all the way. We had a great deal of support.

10.17.26

It is true that for many the situation becomes critical. Moreover, it is the middle of winter. Some families can't even heat themselves properly. The strike committee endeavors to assist them.

Archive sound

Code :10.17.42 off

10.17.48 in

This is a letter from a Flemish comrade striker.

"I broach the subject of my request. I ask your strike committee if it can come to my aid.

I have 5 children and an unemployed husband. Thanking you in advance."

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.17.58 off

10.18.01 in

The president of the strike committee said: don't worry girl. Keep going, and we'll help you. We are starting to get some money, and we'll help you. That's when it was decided to make packages to aid the women. She came and held on like everybody else.

« la petite Germaine » at the microphone

Code :10.18.19 off

10.18.25 in

10.18.32 off

10.18.37 in

Never forget comrade, there are hundreds of faces watching you on every side. Our fight is united, and we'll come through it united. There are no politics in our action. There are all kinds of action, all kinds of action.

We'll achieve victory on our own. The struggle goes on.

10.18.43 (leave the song for 15 seconds)

The song is to be subtitled for the international version!

10.18.58

The FN women are intractable, but not without humor! They parody a popular song "your job is your health". It would become their hymn, a blast of derision to help them endure their long ordeal.

Annie Massay

Code :10.19.22 off

10.19.28 in

They were miners' daughters, metalworkers' wives, metalworkers themselves. They were people who were standing up, and who wanted nothing so much as to affirm themselves. And I could feel that they were going to hang on.

10.19.39

As the talks flounder, the management puts forward a provocative argument: women are absent three times more frequently than men. And not without reason...

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.19.54

If one day men have children, maybe it will change. But up to now, since men are supermen and have all the rights over their wives and their daughters... we are the ones who have the children. And it's up to the woman to carry them, to give birth to them, to raise them, and work as well.

10.20.22

There is a little crèche at FN, but it is always overcrowded! Who looks after the children when they are ill?! The image of the mother/homemaker still prevails! If she wants to work, she has to assume the consequences.

10.20.45

6th week of the strike. 4,600 workers have now been laid off. But still the movement gains momentum.

10.20.58

logbook

March 16th. The solidarity movement extends beyond our borders. The 21st. A French metalworker's delegate takes the floor.

French woman at the microphone

Code :10.21.08

Dear friends of FN. Your dynamic initiative has been a rejuvenating experience of optimism and hope, not only for women workers, the Belgian working classes, as well as for us in France. But for all working women and the working classes of the 6 Common Market countries. Long live the FN's women workers struggle!

Long live the solidarity between our two working classes, and between Belgian and French metalworkers. Long live the unity of action, more crucial than ever, between union organizations and the workers of the 6 Common Market countries.

Jenny Magnée

Code :10.21.49 in

10.22.10 off

As soon as she finished speaking, she held up her glass and we sang the International. As I wasn't in the union at the time, I sang it like everybody else. And then, suddenly, I was gripped with emotion, and I said: let's do something else, let's sing the Marseillaise. *And we all got up and sang the Marseillaise.*

Jenny Magnée

Code :10.22.23

The French woman cried. I was very moved, you can't imagine. I have goose bumps just speaking about it. It's incredible.

10.22.36

The FN woman's strike is a talking point all over the world. Its slogan, equal work, equal pay, has become international! Gestures of support arrive from everywhere!

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.22.51 off

10.22.57 in

We received letters and even checks from every European and extra-European country. Money came in even from India. They say those people are so poor... and yet they managed to find a way of sending us a little check.

10.23.10

logbook

April 7th. We organize a demonstration in the streets of Herstal. No incidents to report.

Silence...

10.23.19

There would be no incidents, it's true. And yet, in the inner circle, the movement doesn't enjoy unanimous support. Far from it.

10.23.30. for the international version, subtitle the banner "Equal work, equal pay..."

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.23.38

They do it to annoy their husbands, or to meet their lovers. You have got to be bright to say a thing like that.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.23.54 off

10.24.03 in

We were all rolling in money. It was to buy fur coats and jewelry and to have lovers.

There. It was a luxury to stink at FN.

10.24.14

On May 5, the exhausted women regretfully accept a compromise.

Jenny Magnée

Code :10.24.23 off

10.24.27 in

What I didn't like was the behavior of the unions at the time. That is, when they wanted the strike to continue, we voted by a show of hands. But when they wanted us to go back to work... because they could go no farther, because there was nothing more in the offing... then it was a secret ballot. So all those who were in difficulty... paying the house, paying everything, with nothing coming in, and little children... well that's what made us go back to work. Otherwise we would have held out for more.

10.25.03**logbook**

**May 10th. We officially return to the factory.
The press is unanimous in recognizing the originality and the repercussions of our movement.**

10.25.15

Bitterly they resume work. They asked for a 5 franc raise. They obtain less than half that. It's a semi-failure. But the strike shook mentalities.

Annie Massay

Code :10.25.28 in

10.25.47 off

I think the women's strike woke everybody up. First of all it woke up the unions, who found themselves up against the wall owing to their inability to achieve an open dialogue, insofar as they... I won't say they paid no attention to the women... who profited from the general revendication nonetheless... but they didn't deal with their particular problem. It woke them up.

The political parties also. Because as soon as the impact spread, it was assimilated into the feminist current which developed postwar. And there was a resonance there among the grassroots women... a powerful resonance that gave credibility to what had been for them up until then but an intellectual debate.

Rita Jeusette

Code :10.26.16

We were fighting for women the world over, not for Europeans in particular... since it's a European law that has never been respected and never will be. It's futile. It never will be

10.26.36

The women found themselves once again subject to the machine oil and the production pace. But their working conditions hadn't really changed. Eight years later, in 1974, they would march into combat once more.

Annie Massay

Code :10.26.56 in

10.27.04 off

10.27.34 in

They weren't discouraged. We had the proof a few years later, in 1974, when they re-launched a 3-week strike *in which they received something important: the opening of 60 supplementary posts, whereas before they were in a ghetto of posts especially for women. It's important. They also humanized working conditions, they got well-kept refectories, proper toilet facilities, showers... the things they needed to be... to feel like women again despite a hard and dirty job.*

I would say the 1974 strike was really complementary, and showed that their 1966 strike hadn't been all pain and toil in vain. They suffered, but in the long run, they won.

Luc Hermant, Philippe Delporte, 2006