

AUTONOMOUS STRUGGLES OF WOMEN

When we talk about autonomous struggles fought by women, we mean those organised struggles where women challenge capitalist definitions of their part in the production process, and in doing so challenge the wage-relations between capital and workers. We see that because women get so little out of this wage relation (ie half the work we do is unpaid, the other half low-paid) that we are amongst the first to be able to make demands that break through it - ie the unsupported mothers in the Claimants' Union and the Family Allowance Campaign, demanding a guaranteed, independent allowance for women. Because women do two jobs, their struggles often generalise issues from both: they tend to raise inevitably the questions of socialisation of the struggle, and so they work towards the unification of the working class.

In the last few years there has been an upsurge in these struggles - women at Fords Dagenham refusing to be low-paid because of their sex, night cleaners organising themselves for the first time, women in Ireland fighting the British troops, the nurses refusing to be low-paid because their work is "women's", "caring" work, the women in Kirkby spending their rent money on the family, thousands of women, in London in particular, leaving their husbands and occupying houses....all these struggles are the beginnings of women's potential power to fight for and get what we need in the face of capital offering us sugar-coated equality which never happens.

These struggles, together with the growth of the women's liberation movement, have radically affected both the nature and the content of class struggle in Britain.

This sudden strength and importance of women's struggles must be seen in the context of specific changes in the productive role of women since the war, but also against a background of history of women's revolt and organisation going back over hundreds of years (a history which has been less marked in other countries, especially where the Catholic church has been strong and women aren't such a large part of the waged workforce).

Women have been sold the biggest productivity deal of all time - they now do two jobs, one in the home and one out - and they only get paid for one of them. Since the Second World War, the number of married women going out to work has increased by 15%. Women's work in the home has been rationalised and mechanised so that they now do the same amount of work - the same basic chores of working, cleaning, shopping - in only a fraction of the time it used to take.

Now, in the current crisis, one wage is no longer enough to bring up a family on, so women are forced to sell their labour on the labour market as well, where capital treats us as a huge reserve army of labour that can be pushed in and out of work as capital requires because our "real" place is in the home. When one looks at the jobs that women do on the labour market, we see that they are mainly the same jobs that women do at home - cleaning, sewing, making toys, producing food, and, above all, "looking after" and "caring".

Only now our labour has been socialised and rationalised, and is, as a consequence, hundreds of times more productive. For example, in the olden days a woman might have spent a whole afternoon making and baking a pie. Now she goes into the factory, produces perhaps a hundred pies, and on her way home from work, picks up a pie from the supermarket and pops it in the oven for the family (consumption of convenience foods has increased by 25% over the last 10 years, whereas consumption of all foods has increased by 5%).

These areas of commodity production and servicing which were formerly carried out within the home and have now been socialised, are now also areas in which surplus value is extracted directly (the indirect extraction of surplus value through the labour power which women produce and service is still maintained). So, the new power which women are beginning to wield is in large part a consequence of this enormously expanded productivity of women and the contradiction between this enormous productivity expected of women and the narrowness of the prospects open to us.

In Britain, more than any other country in the world (except perhaps Russia), capitalism has been forced by working class struggle to involve the working class in capitalist development, not only through the changed use of the wage and collective bargaining, but through tying working class aspirations for a greater social wealth and social justice to capitalist development - its tool being the welfare state.

But although the welfare state has contributed some negative aspects of class struggle (privatisation and individualisation of social needs) it is essentially the result of working class victory, and has created the space for certain kinds of consciousness and struggle to develop. In particular it has created the space for women and children to develop away from their families. Better housing, health care and contraception, means that women have had fewer kids, and social security and welfare benefits have given women with families at least some slight chance of independence.

As the social factory has increasingly taken responsibility for the areas of social life which formerly were the sole responsibility of women at home, it has lifted a lot of the intense daily emotional and physical pressure from women, and given them the space to make a more critical assessment of their role in society. But now that the welfare services, like the whole of capitalist society, are in crisis, more of the old pressures are coming back - increased bureaucracy to get benefits, half of them have disappeared (school meals, free dental treatment, prescriptions etc), and the hospitals and schools become more like factories and factory-line production (the number of induced births in hospitals has shot up in the last few months). The deterioration of these services, that women have to deal with and work in, means that women are organising and fighting back both inside and outside the institutions - these struggles (rent strikes, occupations, claimants' unions, nurses' and cleaners' strikes, teachers and schoolkids' strikes) are all posing the politicisation of working class struggle - widening the wage struggle to social demands that are beginning to demand changes in all the social relationships determined by the capitalist form of production

(eg nurses demanding support from miners, and that they are entitled to the same sort of wage).

In the post-war boom, the expansion of British industry created a demand for labour which had to be met to a large extent by women. In particular, the wage struggles of male workers meant that a source of cheap labour was needed for under-capitalised labour intensive industries and services: women and immigrants became this source.

Britain's role as an international financial and imperialist power required an enormous secretarial and clerical workforce; the expansion of social services and welfare created a demand for hospital workers, teachers, social workers. Even the Universities, the Civil Service, the BBC had to start recruiting women. Women mainly from middle or upper working class backgrounds who went into these jobs were sold an ideology of emancipation and equality, and were in fact often "equally" educated to prepare them for these "careers". It didn't take long for women to realise this was a con; that the work was shitwork like any other, no prospects, and that they were working for pay and under conditions that white male workers had rejected years ago. Then, after the "education" and a year or two at a "career", the drudgery and obsessiveness of housework and the mind-destroying loneliness of bringing up kids in a nuclear family situation. Out of this experience was born the women's liberation movement.