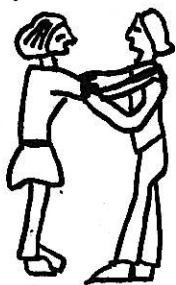


THIS IS WHAT SOME WOMEN DID...

We started a food co-op on the estate, which houses about 2000 families in low rise buildings and two tower blocks. Then...

Sometimes the Wednesday meetings are just about making out orders, but often there are discussions about all kinds of things - the conditions of life on the estate, lifts, drains, bringing up children, the Council, work, sterilization, housing battles, parents and our own childhoods, schools, vandalism, nervous breakdowns... It became clear that people needed to have a situation to meet other women and talk. There are a lot of splits between women, and a lot of isolation in people's lives. It looked like we all needed friends as much as we needed cheap food. We talked about the idea of having a women's group to meet for discussions on the alternate Wednesdays when we weren't having the food co-op meetings. What finally emerged is a women's self-help therapy group which after several months and a few people dropping out, now consistently involves three of us from the food co-op (one from Big Flame, one from the estate, one from a nearby estate) and a CP comrade whom we met through the women's centre.



"There are four of us in the group, three from the food co-op, we meet once a fortnight, we sort of discuss problems and try and work them out, it's really good, I enjoy that. If I'd never become involved in the food co-op I'd never have become involved in that. I find that from the food co-op, lots of new things have opened out."

I had been doing a lot of reading and practice in my own life around the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and the Gestalt therapists, and wanted to bridge the gap between that activity and my other political activity in the area. This is why I wanted to set up something which was a bit different from an ordinary consciousness-raising group, though in some ways similar. It reflected an understanding that for us to be able to progress

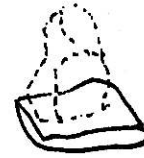


"We do physical exercises, relaxation exercises, stretching and breathing, they make you aware of your body, different parts of your body. Physical exercises make you more aware of your feelings - you have feelings you don't really expect to have and after a little while, you get into talking about them."

in struggle it's not enough for us to be presented with new situations and new understandings - we also have to change at the level of our feelings and gut reactions, undoing the conditioning that plays as important a part in keeping us passive as anything that is happening in the present. This means that in the group we do body work - massage and Reichian breathing exercises - and try not just to talk about, but to locate and express, the feelings that daily life under capitalism makes us feel, but compels us to control. The group has developed falteringly and its future is still unsure, but some positive things have come out of it. For example, one of us who has always played the role of being "nice" and "quiet" says that she has been

getting into her anger much more, it has been coming out in dissatisfaction at her job, challenging her evening class teacher, etc. At another time it might be one of us who has a full-time job expressing physically and non-verbally the stress she feels in keeping at work - which she usually puts a good face on - and realising how much she needs solidarity and support. When these feelings have been located it becomes easier to act on the world according to your needs.

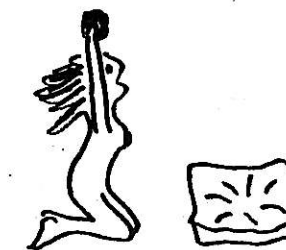
The group has made several outings en masse to the so-called "growth centres". These visits have been useful in developing our knowledge of certain techniques, as for example for body relaxation and awareness, working out compliance with authority roles, acting-out games, etc. At the same time we have disagreed with the way those techniques are



"You have a pillow to stand in place of somebody or something but usually somebody who's giving you trouble or giving you a problem, you use the pillow to speak to them in a way which normally you can't, so that normally you can never get into the depths of it."

used at growth centres, and have made a vigorous critique of the way "personal growth" is defined at these institutions and sold to those who can afford it. We have had discussions towards working out a clear collective alternative to these centres, and to valium and ECT, as ways out of the emotional and social impasse which capitalism forces us into.

I see people's consciousness and hence their political actions as being determined by their total material reality - their everyday lives past and present. This is different from the Trot groups with their clear line between reality and ideology, and their emphasis on newspapers as a way of changing people's consciousness. Consciousness is complicated and contradictory, as social experience under capitalism is as complicated and contradictory. A kid can hate being caged up in a stuffy classroom, but that



"Being a woman, even though you may be angry, you may be an aggressive person, you're always made to feel guilty about it. I don't feel guilty any more, it's part of the business of rejecting conditioned behaviour which I started a long time ago."

feeling is overlaid by fear of being punished if he goes out of it. The consciousness and the responses that are potentially socialist and revolutionary are the ones we need to draw out and build on, but sometimes they lie deep under layers of self-criticism and internalized repression, which need to be recognised and worked through.

When we say that material reality determines consciousness, it's important to understand what that material reality includes. It's where we live and what work we do, but it's also the ads we see on the tube, the television programmes we watch, the relationships we have, and how we are in those relationships. It includes taking part in the food co-op, going to therapy meetings where you can find and express your anger, and building up relationships of trust and solidarity with other women.

Members of the Lincoln Estate Women's Self-Help Therapy Group