

WHATEVER'S HAPPENED TO THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT?

The need for an autonomous women's movement:

Firstly, in talking about the women's movement, we must realise that it has far more strength in London than elsewhere, simply because of the no.'s of women involved. So it's more possible for women in London to have confidence about asserting our autonomy from men and acting separately. Because of this and also because it's easier to squat in London, it's more possible for women to live in women's collectives. Women who live in towns outside of London must find it a real uphill struggle to assert their political understanding and have an autonomous practise in the face of male definitions about what they should be doing. (This is put very clearly in the Big Flame women's article about the women's group on Tower Hill).

This is one reason why we think the autonomous national women's movement is essential.

What do we mean by the autonomous women's movement?

Unlike the political parties, we don't see that the women's movement ranks with 'the black movement', 'the students' movement', 'the unemployed movement' as subsidiaries to industrial struggle that have to be 'linked up' through the party structure. We see that these movements each have fundamental revolutionary impulses and understanding particular to their own exploitation, they are each part of the revolutionary process and are making leaps forward in revolutionary consciousness.

The women's movement has an impetus of its own and is still in the early stages of developing a revolutionary theory and practise. This impetus will only be maintained by the women's movement remaining an autonomous movement in its own right.

We see that 'autonomy' has a different meaning from 'separatism'. Women need space and time away from men to define their own needs and wants, assert our identity in the face of what capitalism and male-dominated society imposes on us. Sometimes our interests are the same in struggle as men's, sometimes they are different, sometimes against men. 'Separatism' means that women make a principle of acting at all times separately from men - this we don't agree with.

Through the autonomy of the women's movement: women's groups, living collectives, conferences, many of us have been able to see what capitalism has done to us personally and we've been able to break through some of the conditioning - been able to break with our primary reliance on men and build confidence and solidarity in asserting what we want as women.

At the same time, a systematic analysis of women's function under capitalism has begun (Margaret Benston's 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation'; Maria R.d.C.'s 'Women and the Subversion of the Community'.)

Through this we have begun to understand how our personal fuck-ups have their roots in the relationships of production and reproduction of the labour force, i.e. we've come to see how our economic oppression and our sexual and personal oppression are one and the same thing.

Out of this we have begun to build a practise where we can fight on all fronts - against our ideological roles as sex objects, mothers, housewives - as well as against the actual institutions that control and exploit us: -hospitals, factories, the family etc.

We see this integration of our struggles against all the forms of control in our lives is fundamental to the revolutionary movement in the advanced capitalist societies where the capitalist ideology is part of our consciousness. In the past, political theory has tended to separate the different aspects of our lives into economic/social/sexual and as a result our practise is partial and cannot reach the whole of people's experience of capitalist society.

The importance of the women's movement to revolutionary struggle as a whole.

The 'compartmentalisation' mentioned above appears to be at the root of many of the antagonisms expressed at the newsletter conferences: the false polarisation of people presenting sexual/personal politics as something completely different from industrial/community politics. One of the causes of this antagonism is that those involved in industrial activity can talk with a confidence and authority that comes from the fact that there is a long history of revolutionary theory and practise behind industrial struggles - whereas the theory of sexual repression and conditioning of personal relationships under capitalism is very tentative and only small isolated pockets of people are attempting to bring this understanding into their practise. And so it's very difficult to talk about sexuality and personal oppression in the conferences - and people come to resent the confidence of those involved in industrial struggles.

But what seals this split is that 'sexuality', 'industry' and 'community' are still seen as separate - whereas we should be working out how the relationships of production are reproduced in our sexual and social relationships - and how our social, sexual conditioning keeps people going back to the same working conditions. This means that those organising at the point of production have to understand sexual/social conditioning and bring this into their practise just as much as those involved in social/sexual struggles in the community have to understand the relations of production and bring this into their practise.

We think this integration has begun to take place particularly through the women's liberation movement.

Women and the Politics of Autonomy.

In the industrial situation, the 'Politics of autonomy' means the assertion of our own needs against the needs of the bosses. Traditionally, struggles have been waged in the industrial situation by workers demanding a 'fair' wage, a 'share of the profits'. In the factories capitalism has used the workers' struggles for more money to serve the capitalists' need for more productivity; the result is a growth economy which suits the needs of capital, and a steady rate of inflation which means that what the worker earns in wages is taken back by the food companies and the landlords and the tax-man. This has happened largely because the Trade Unions, which usually act as the mediators in these negotiations, accept the capitalists' 'right' to make a 'fair profit', so long as the workers are getting more money too.

We don't accept the bosses' right to make a profit, and we do think we'd be better off without any bosses at all. We fight for our needs as people who want whole, satisfying lives - and we see that these desires effectively put a spoke in the smooth-running wheel of capitalism - if you want to stay in bed with someone you love, you'll be late for work. If you get friendly with your workmates, you'll resist being moved about. If you feel under the weather you'll have a day off. Sometimes you just don't feel like working at all - you feel like going out and enjoying yourself with your friends.

But to fit in with the needs of capital, we have to surrender our desires, our identities as people, and become just labour power, appendages of machines - or for women: sex objects, loving wife and mother, efficient and capable housewife, moral educator, nurse and dumb half-wit.

The discovery of ourselves as people, the assertion of our needs and wants, is our expression of political autonomy, whether it's in the factory, the home or the bed. People at work challenge their function as wage labourers by sabotaging their products, arrange their work time so they can chat and booze with their friends, organize collective crime rings to rip-off the product - they refuse to be 'workers'.

Women refuse to spend all day with the kids, put them into care when things get desperate, leave their husbands when they've had enough, refuse to keep the home spotless, refuse to be pretty, patient, have sex we don't want, kids we don't want - we refuse to be 'women'.

The contradictions of women's role are becoming greater as more women are brought into the workforce and expected to work for less money and perform two functions - the one in the home being unpaid. The pressures and strains on women's lives are increasing as the income she has to manage as the housewife is being stretched by inflation, welfare cuts and increasing taxation. The institutions she has to deal with are becoming more factory like and alienating (eg. schools and hospitals)

and the power is being turned up through adverts and magazines to make women conform, and through the social services.

The contradiction between the pressure put on women to conform to their ideological role and the impossibility of their doing this is starting to explode.

It is for these reasons that we see the whole question of capitalist ideology is being brought to the forefront through the womens liberation movement.

This question is an essential part of present day revolutionary theory and practice - because the revolutionary movement against economic/state structures can be hindered by the ideological conditioning in people's heads and relationships. So we see wmen's struggles as being fundamentally important to the development of a revolutionary movement.

The Future of the Autonomous Women's Movement

The womens liberation conferences

The national conferences have remained dominated by middle class reformism. So the womens Socialist conferences were started in '73. Unfortunately these have been used by the political parties to hammer out a 'strategy' for the womens movement which has alienated a lot of revolutionary women.

There are different tendencies, which can be roughly summarised as: Firstly, those who see womens struggle in opposition to the class struggle. We would agree that the struggle for womens liberation cannot wait for the industrial working class to get going - but here the radical feminists should be distinguished from the wishy wash of amorphous feminists. The radical feminixsts say that class ~~xxx~~ divisions are not economic/ideological but biological and rest on biological sex differences and reproductive functions and therefore there are only two classes - men and women.

We don't think that the biological difference is in itself so fundamental to people's lives; that it is rather capitalism that has perpetuated and exaggerated this division of labour ~~by the conditions of~~ ~~of the labour force~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~industrial~~ ~~and~~ ~~social~~ ~~to~~ ~~a~~ ~~certain~~ ~~extent~~, but in fact women are brought in and out of the workforce according to capitalism's needs and we see that its more the ideology of women's inferiority (thinks: and therefore non-militant) that keeps the home fires burning.

Secondly, in contrast to the radical feminists, are the women in the Trotskyist and Communist parties, who argue that the fundamental oppression of capitalist society is the extraction of surplus value

by the bosses from the workers and all other forms of oppression are reducible to this. So they insist that the struggle of womens liberation can only be at the point of production.

To these we would answer that 'seizing the means of production' is too narrow a conception of what revolution is about - to be a revolution at all it must assert people's needs in every area of their lives. It doesn't just take place in the workplace but is fought in the community, at home, in bed.

Thirdly, there is the tendency that unites the insights of both these groups in the understanding that women's struggles are the class struggle as waged by women. This is the position of the Power Of Women (P.O.W.) collective and other Marxist Feminists.

We share the analysis that revolutionary struggle is not only for the ownership of the means of production but is a struggle to revolutionise the social relations of production. But we see the P.O.W. demand for Wages for Housework as a diversion from this struggle. The demand could be granted through the Tax Credit System (already the Labour Government is saying that ~~the~~ the tax credits will go to the wife) and we'll just end up in an endless haggle over a 'fair' wage for housework. The demand accepts the boss/worker relationship - a bit for him and a bit for me, with him defining what's 'fair'. We fight for our needs irrespective of whether or not they can be met by capitalism.

Also, this demand says nothing about how women can struggle against out function as reproducers of the social relations of production. I.e. our IDEOLOGICAL role as housewives, mothers and sex objects and consumers. The demand puts the perspective that we should carry on doing these functions - but get paid for them.

Women start changing their idea of themselves when they start taking action and organising. E.g. when women are putting a lot of time into organising a rent strike they have to question the amount of time they put into looking after their kids, doing the housework and making themselves look attractive. We see it is through struggle that the myths about a 'womans place' break down - because these myths are confronted on a practical everyday level.

So we see that women are going to change their ideological role through the actions they take, rather than ^{through} making demands.

Perspectives For the Women Involved In the Newsletter

Although a lot has been written in the newsletter about womens struggle, its importance has never entered into discussions at the conferences. At the last conference it was decided to have a

general discussion on the womens movement but it got forgotten about because of an argument between the men.

Capitalist divisions and values are still rife amongst the 'militants'. Talking about an unsupported mothers group can seem very insignificant compared with 'the struggle at Fords' when in fact the problems brought up in a meeting of unsupported mums question the the workings of capitalism at all levels - kids, housing, sex, work...

We see the need for autonomous women's meetings to thoroughly talk out our practice and to develop our analysis of womens function and situation under capitalism.

A Framework For the Future

So far the discussions in the womens meetings have been disjointed because theres no framework within which to talk about our particular experiences.

The Welfare State

Many women have chosen to be active in the community rather than the workplace.

But what is the community? For many of us its a series of institutions - the council, schools, hospitals, social services, social security - which we form separate groups to work around. At the moment our activity can seem like endless battles against institutions because we don't express a political analysis to direct these struggles (many people left the Claimants Unions because of this). In fact, all these institutions are part of the Welfare State. We need an analysis of the Welfare State as a whole - its history, the ideas behind it (Keynes and Beveridge), how the different institutions mould the working force and family structure that capitalism needs, how they are all the time being adapted to suit capitalism's needs and suppress ours.

Womens ideological role is becoming more contradictory due to these changes in the Welfare State. The adverts and magazines etc tell us to be ideal housewives etc while the actual institutions that women have to deal with as housewives or mothers slowly disintegrate:

- the disappearance of welfare benefits
- the end of subsidised council housing
- the destruction of the extended family as people are moved to new towns and estates
- chaos in schools

Or they are becoming more centralised and reinforcing our role:

- centralisation of hospitals and Nat Health Service
- population control through sterilisation and abortion

'soft cops', the social services, patching up the breakdowns and making women 'cope'.

It would be good to discuss our practice in the context of these developments.

Community Versus Work?

We think too much emphasis has been put on women organising in the community rather than the work place. The developments taking place at work and through the wage effect women at home just as much as men and women in the workplace.

One of women's particular functions is making the family's income cover the family's needs. This is becoming impossible due to: steady inflation in prices and rents; increase in taxation (proportion taken out of wages went up 12% 71-72); increasing unemployment - the 3 day week, the recession mean a further loss in income to the family as a whole; the Tax Credit System means the State decides what the family's needs are and the wage is adjusted accordingly.

Also, it can't be ignored that the majority of women go out to work now. We need to look at the struggles women are waging at work - the demand for equal pay, creche provisions, fights against redundancies - what women's needs in the work situation are.

On the basis of this paper we propose that we have a women's meeting on Saturday morning to discuss the future of the autonomous women's movement and how we want to organise ourselves. Concrete suggestions are: regular meetings between women in newsletter groups and other women who're interested; take part in the national socialist weekend workshops; prepare discussion papers for them; organise a weekend workshop about 'women and the Welfare State'.

Also we would like to discuss the importance of the women's struggle to the development of a revolutionary movement between everybody at the conference.

love and solidarity,
women from Hackney and East London Big Flame