

WOMEN'S LIVES - A BASIS FOR STRUGGLE

Demands

The four demands, as they now stand, are limited and isolated. We want to see the growth of women's revolutionary consciousness - not just limited material improvements - and so we see the need to build up a total understanding of the contradictions of women's lives under capitalism i.e. the fight for adequate child care cannot be separated from the way our relationship to our children is controlled by family planning, abortion, schools, hospitals, social workers, the housing we live in, the work we do.

We want to fight for the sort of society we want to live in - this is our main perspective. Here is where we disagree with the demand for 'Wages for Housework'. While it may be an attempt to demystify the work done by women in the home of its 'love/service' trappings and demand recognition of its role in servicing capital, it says nothing about our function as reproducers of the social relationships of production in our role as mothers, housewives, sexual objects. As a demand posed from outside onto women's struggles, it denies the fact that these struggles often go way beyond a recognition of women's function as the reproducer of labour power. This raises the whole question of the nature and role of demands.

We need to emphasise that part of our perspective has always been that the development of revolutionary theory needs to be out of our practice and the struggles that are going on; therefore we can never say at any one time, 'This is the correct strategy for all time'. The same applies to demands and to holding up demands as to what the women's movement is all about. Demands are thrown up in the course of struggle, detached from struggle they are meaningless, imposed on struggles from the outside they can limit the struggle and therefore limit women's consciousness in the struggle. In a socialist women's movement we should be developing analysis which gives us the framework within which to view our particular struggles -- in other words the movement is made coherent around our 'politics' not around particular demands.

Non-Socialist Women's Movement

We need a broad based non-sectarian women's movement to develop our knowledge and analysis of the changes in capitalism and women's struggles which are going on. We're not at a stage in revolutionary struggle where we can use a conference to hammer out strategies. We can use the workshops to work on things in detail and through this we will begin to develop revolutionary perspectives - to define what are the autonomous* elements of women's struggles.

Women's Struggle and Class Struggle

There's been a lot of talk in the women's movement about the relationship between women's struggles and class struggle. Generally the arguments have been of three kinds: First, those who have seen women's struggles as prior to class struggle, and have insisted that it's no good waiting 'till after the revolution' for women's fight against their own oppression to begin, since a revolution which did not take into account questions of sexual liberation would soon turn out to be as oppressive as the society it replaced. These arguments have tended to come from feminists in the Women's Movement who have as a consequence concentrated their efforts in struggles around women's sexuality and consciousness and have refused to work in 'male dominated' political parties around working class issues. Radical Feminists have no analysis of class in economic terms but see two classes only, men and women defined by biological differences.

Second, in contrast to these, have been arguments put forward by women in the Trotskyist and Communist Parties, who have seen the fundamental oppression of Capitalist society as the extraction of surplus value by the bosses from the workers, to which all other forms

*footnote - we use the word 'autonomous' to mean autonomous from the needs of capital; e.g. if we talk about playgroups it is not to free us to go out to work to produce surplus value for capital.

of oppression are reducible and who have seen the struggles of women as important in so far as they are reducible to struggles against this oppression.

Thirdly, there is the tendency which unites the insights of both of these groupings in a perspective that sees that women's struggles are the class struggle as waged by women (they have a broader understanding of class struggle than women in the second group) This is the position of PCW and other Marxist Feminists: we feel that we share some of the analysis of PCW but think that wages for Housework is the wrong strategy with which to back up this analysis. (See section on Demands above and section on Claimants Unions below).

We have learned a lot from all these tendencies. From the feminists we have learned not to rely on others to fight our fights for us; we must fight against our own oppression as women with other women. We cannot assume that a post-revolutionary society will be any the less sexist (or hierarchical or authoritarian) than bourgeois society, unless we make the struggles against these part of the revolution. We have learnt that seizing the means of production is too narrow a conception of what a revolution is about. To be a revolution at all, it must assert the value of people's experiences in every area of their lives, not only in production.

From the Marxists in Trotskyist and Communist parties, we have learned that we must look for material reasons for women's oppressions if we are to understand and fight it. We must look at the role women play in society to see why they are oppressed in the ways they are oppressed. We come to see the enemy not as 'men' but as the capitalist system; we see that we cannot fight our oppression without fighting the system which institutes and perpetuates our oppression.

With Marxist Feminists we share the analysis that the class struggle doesn't only take place in the factory, but is fought in the community, in the home, in bed. It is not just a struggle for the 'ownership of the means of production but a struggle to revolutionise the social relations of production; and that includes the work that women do in and out of the home. But we don't believe that it is only as workers that people can organise, whether its houseworkers or factory workers. In fact we think that its part of the con of capitalism that we come to see ourselves primarily as workers - because workers are what they need. We feel it is important to organise and fight around our needs as people in every area of our lives.

Women's ideological role as a basis for struggle

~~XXXX~~ We see that women's ideological role is becoming more and more contradictory - i.e. the ads and magazines tell us to be ideal mothers and beautiful sex objects etc., and encourage us to believe that we can achieve this ~~through~~ through spending more on consumer durables, instant foods or cosmetics, while low wages put them beyond our reach. The same commercial pressures which stress our ideological role also make it impossible for us to fulfill it. Women take on most of the responsibility for running the family and consequently ~~we~~ tend to feel guilt and personal failure when their children are not doing well at school or getting into trouble, or when their home is less than immaculate or their family badly fed. Yet the actual institutions which are supposed to support and reinforce these roles are either slowly disintegrating or are becoming more centralised and completely out of our control.

i.e. disappearance of welfare benefits
the end of subsidised council housing
disintegration of the extended family as people are moved to new towns and new estates
chaos in the schools
centralisation of hospitals and the Nat Health Service,

increasing population control through family planning and abortion and contraception

social workers encouraging mothers to reinforce their role through community centres, playgroups etc.

We can see that present economic developments are putting particular pressure on women; for instance, one of women's particular functions is making family income cover the family's needs. This is becoming impossible due to:

- proposed welfare cuts: £500m from reduced food subsidies
- £200m from reduced housing subsidies

This is partly a counter inflationary move - the family income will have to be spent on essentials - food, rent, school meals, medicines.

Along with this goes steady inflation - an increase of 4.7% in the retail price index 1972-3 with an increase in basic hourly earnings over the same period of 1.3%. Increasing unemployment which means loss of job jobs predominantly to women, adolescents and retirement age workers which means a further loss of income to the family as a whole.

Increasing taxation: increase of 12% 1970-1 in proportion taken out of wages by taxation.

The Tax Credit System means further state control over the family income i.e. the state assesses what a family's needs are according to size, income etc. and tax credits are given accordingly (Now that the Labour Government is in power we may see some modifications, but we think the basic trend will be the same).

Within the Women's Movement confronting our roles as mothers, wives, sex objects, housekeepers - has often seemed to be a matter of 'will' - possibly this voluntarism stems from the fact that many of us come from middle class backgrounds and have been in a position to choose for example not to live in families. When we recognise the increasing difficulties for all women of maintaining their ideological role and also their difficulties in escaping from it, we know that we have to organise together to smash those mystifications which keep us where we are. We know that this starts when women begin taking action for themselves, organising themselves. In the libertarian movement we've been involved in various struggles (see section on 'Who We Are') but these struggles remain partial and isolated while we don't have a more unified theory of the contradictions in women's lives under capitalism to build and sustain the demystification which results from our partial struggles and expose in every area of our lives the moves that capital makes against us.

At present in the women's movement there seems to be a split between activists and theorists. We believe that the understanding and theory we are talking about must be developed through practice. An example of this is the work some of us have done in trying to understand our practice in the claimants union.

Women in the Claimants' Union

Many of us got involved in the C.U.s because we wanted to organize with working class women and there seemed no concrete basis for doing this in the Women's Movement. We went through consciousness raising groups but these often remained at a subjective level and neglected any class analysis or practice. Also within the C.U.s we were organizing around our own needs, some of us are unsupported mothers, we didn't want to go out to work, and we had our own children to look after. We had seen the importance of organising with women outside the workplace partly from our own situation as claimants---women partly because we saw the necessity of people organising around their own particular exploitation and saw that this was possible. The events of May '68, the students' the women's and the black movement, had shown that it was possible to organize outside of the point of production, and also that capitalism is a total system that affects us in every area of our lives, not just at the workplace.

From our consciousness as women outside of the workplace we wanted to organize around what women have to put up with as housewives stuck in with their kids, as tenants, as consumers forced to make the budget stretch, our difficulties in getting adequate housing etc.

We saw the unsupported mother at the extreme end of this exploitation. We also developed concretely a fairly good understanding of how the welfare state fucks you over. Unsupported mothers are continually harassed by social workers etc. We saw the controlling aspect of 'liberal community work' at first hand. There was a lot of informal organisation - fighting down at the housing department, the social services, social security the gas board, evictions - that was really good and powerful. We were able to understand the contradiction between the welfare institutions which, as agents of social control, attempted to make us live up to our images but as unsupported mothers on SS we were unable to do it, even if we had wanted to. The insights from the women's movement and consciousness raising were lost because, except for a few occasions, we often relate to other women on a purely material level of getting more money, a roof over our heads, and in some cases collective child care. Organising with unsupported mothers we felt it was an endless struggle against institutions which we weren't able to express politically.

One of the reasons for this may have been a lack of an overall political understanding of the function of these institutions, together with the fact that we tended to identify ourselves as claimants working from our own situation rather than as self-conscious revolutionaries. We were further influenced by 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' which underlined the economic importance of women's value as housewives under capitalism reproducing labour power. In England this gave rise to the demand for 'Wages for Housework'. For us, it underlined the importance of working with women in the community. The CUs had earlier developed the perspective of guaranteed income which would be an income based on our needs not on our producing or reproducing surplus value. However at first we saw guaranteed income not as a perspective but as a demand or slogan which would mobilise the whole of the working class. We thought of it as a campaign we could launch and started thinking about how much money we should demand, whether kids should get it etc. rather than looking at ongoing actual anti-capitalist struggles where the demand for a guaranteed income was already being posed or where it could be developed. G.I. was seen as an end in itself, a blueprint for a new society rather than a direction for revolutionary struggle. After seeing this mistake we launched the cohabitation campaign as part of the perspective for G.I. It aimed to get rid of the cohabitation rule and to get women an independent income unrelated to wage labour. Although this got us some superficial publicity we never conveyed our understanding of how the family props up the capitalist system. So we learned the limitations of campaigns as forms of organisation divorced from struggles and the impossibility of trying to put over any revolutionary perspectives through campaigns.

We discovered that we couldn't look at claimants and unsupported mothers as a permanent sector of the unemployed but we have to see how the needs of the capitalist economy aimed to control the whole potential labour market. From this we realised that we also needed to reassess the importance of women's struggles in the workplace including equal pay, and that the struggles at home and at work cannot be separated. As yet we haven't had much experience of organising with women at work but our understanding of the role of Unions (as mediators between the capitalists and workers) lead us to look for other ways of organising at work while realising that joining the union can be an important strategy in some situations, e.g. hospital workers.

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Our political backgrounds are made pretty clear in the paper. In the past we've always placed great emphasis on action, and found it difficult to understand how the particular things we were involved in fighting were part of the whole capitalist system.

The women who've written this paper are from Hackney (part of the women's libertarian newsletter grouping) and from East London Big Flame. We're involved in organising around playgroups, low-paid workers/claimants union, squatting and housing, and prices. We've been meeting with women doing similar things from different parts of the country. Most of us are in mixed groups because we see women's struggle as being part of the class struggle. We wrote this paper because we wanted to meet and develop our ideas with more women, both women who are already involved in similar areas of struggle and women who feel unable to get involved in political activity because of the male domination of most left groups. (One of the issues that some women may want to question us on is why we're mixed groups. We'd like to talk about it but it's late at night and we don't feel we can get it down on paper). We see the need for a broad based non sectarian women's movement but we don't see this developing around the four demands (or even the five). We think it can only be built on the struggles of people's everyday lives.