

THE PROBLEM OF PRIORITIES

In spite of good intentions, and considerable work that has been done recently to organize women, we constantly face a problem of priorities. All of us are involved in the radical movement as a whole and we have a tendency to do women's caucus work when we have time.

Only if we can establish the relevance of a women's movement to the revolutionary process as a whole, will we find a place for organizing women in our scheme of priorities as revolutionaries.

THE POLITICAL ARGUMENTS

The primary arguments against socialists working to organize women are these:

1. A movement of women as women is necessarily a reformist movement. It does not attack the structure of capitalist society. It demands only an equal right to be exploited.
2. A women's movement would be a bourgeois, or middle class, movement because it is concerned with cultural, super-structural phenomena, with individualism and freedom, questions that cut across and therefore blur class lines and do not lead to revolutionary consciousness.
3. Because of the dependent position of women in this society, their atomization, their identification with individual men, they are extremely difficult (if not impossible) to organize. Attempts to organize women are wasteful of limited revolutionary forces and resources. Women will be organized along with their men in more general social struggles.

REFORM OR REVOLUTION?

It is theoretically possible that the problems of women as women (as stated in women's caucus leaflets, etc.) could be solved within ~~xxxx~~ capitalism. Birth control, the right to equal work and pay, child care, etc., could all exist within a capitalist society. Advertising would not collapse if the objectification of women were abolished and that aspect of the distortion of human relationships which flows from the subordinate position of women could be overcome.

But the solution of these problems would involve serious confrontations with capitalism and the state; and their solution would pose general structural problems in a sharper way.

Women today are an extremely profitable pool of cheap labor -- they can be shunted back and forth between the home and the labor market as the economy demands. Even with mechanization and automation, and resulting unemployment, this reserve labor force (the 2/3 of women who are NOT working plays an important role in keeping down all wages (particularly of women workers), in union-breaking, etc. And those women who ARE working, 1/3 of the work force, are a tremendous pool of cheap labour. Where else could employers find workers willing to work for less than 40% of what the average man makes?

The right to equal exploitation for women cannot be granted without serious confrontations with important sectors of the capitalist class whose profits depend directly on that cheap labor, and without a shake-up in the economy as a whole. Capitalism could only grant the right to equal work at the risk of posing the problem of unemployment, and who gets the benefits of automation in a much more urgent way.

Freely available birth control and abortion, and day care centres adequate to serve all women, (especially if combined with equal participation in the labor force) would strike a decisive blow at the nuclear family. Again, it is conceivable that state responsibility for children and "socialized" child care could be achieved under capitalism - although it is more conceivable in the context of a thoroughly militarized fascist state than in bourgeois democracy. But this again would involve sharpening the contradictions of capitalist society.

First, we should not underestimate the value of all that unpaid labour that women perform in the home - "unpaid" in the sense that it comes out of the pockets of ordinary workers on the whole. Second, the role of the family in socializing children to be atomised, alienated, individualistic, competitive, is very important to capitalism. And the imposition of total responsibility for children on individual parents contributes to the development of a conservative, "responsible" working class. * (See note at end)

A BOURGEOIS MOVEMENT?

It is true that the women's movement today is beginning on campus. It is also true that working class women often find it difficult to imagine themselves more oppressed than their husbands who come home exhausted every night. It is true that the oppression of women as women cuts across class lines. -- witness Betty Friedan's discussion of the mutilation of middle class women in the U.S. Will our movement then necessarily become a middle class movement with the political implications that flow from that?

This depends mostly on us. Middle class women are already organized, and without our intervention it is possible that women's consciousness could be channeled through these organizations (Councils of Women all the way to VOW) These are the reformist organisations. They have considerable resources. They take good, hard positions on the questions that cut across class lines (like Judy LaMarsh). But no one would call them a movement. They have not organized working women or women students. They have mobilized no one. This suggests the impossibility of dealing with women's problems in a reformist way.

Any women's movement must include the tremendous number of women WORKERS who are almost totally unorganized, either by unions or by women's organizations. The implications of their demands were discussed above. Their problems can only be solved by a class strategy, in the context of the struggle of the working class as a whole. Their demands cannot be middle class demands. In this context, the cultural questions - the rights to control our own bodies, to become human beings, to be treated as equals - in fact generalize and radicalize the immediate struggles. Women's demands on the job (if they are posed as

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WOMEN'S demands) cannot remain on the bread and butter questions alone. They challenge role definitions (doctor-nurse, boss-secretary, teacher-principal), they pose questions of control, and in posing the problem of social responsibility for children they challenge the priorities of the system of the whole.

It is becoming more and more generally recognized that the oppression of the working class is not expressed solely in economic exploitation, but in lack of control, lack of power. Those demands which assert our humanity, our right to control our own lives, are not middle class but an essential part of the workingclass struggle - so long as they are posed collectively, and not in terms of individual solutions.

With an orientation to mass action and public campaigns confronting women's problems as social questions, rather than individual ones - we will likely find the hardest people to organize are middle class housewives who are atomised, individualistic and conservative. To the extent that we can involve these women, we will be winning them away from their class. The people we are most likely to organize are high ~~xxxxx~~ school and university students (mostly workers in training) and working women office workers, teachers, nurses, librarians.

IS IT POSSIBLE?

Before women can be organized at all, they must reject society's definition of women - the dependence on men economically, intellectually, and socially. Is it possible to generate this change in consciousness among large numbers of women in this society?

First, the fact that women's liberation groups are springing up all over North America indicates the potential.

Second, the general consciousness of women - especially youth - on the question is already changing. The rejection of the double standard in morality, of the anti-women marriage ceremonies, etc., is happening on a fairly large scale among young working women as well as students. (As well as being part of the general youth radicalization, this is undoubtedly to a considerable extent a result of the Pill - which incidentally, strengthens above argument about reforms.)

Third, as this change in consciousness proceeds; as men spend more and more time in school; more and more women will be working or looking for work. The oppression of women will be less easily concealed by the mystique when they need to work and find that they are outrageously underpaid and insecure in their jobs, and still confronted with the drudgery of housework in the home.

Not only is it possible to organize women; it is an essential part of building the revolutionary movement as a whole. The position of women today is an important prop of the system, and an important tool of capitalism in dividing the working class. One half of the working class is convinced that politics and organization are none of its business vote ~~xxxxxx~~ conservatively, and act as a conservative pressure on the class as a whole. The nuclear family's role was discussed above. It is hard to imagine a movement strong enough to take on the power of imperialism in North America which excludes one half of

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its constituency, and does not organize around the specific problems which concern that one half.

In fact, at this particular point in history, when the working class is relatively quiet, and students are somewhat isolated from the off-campus community, organization of women can be one of our most fruitful and important areas of work. Women workers and women students confront many of the same problems; the objective basis for unity in action is clearer than between men students and workers. There is potential for concrete results in building the worker-student alliance in this area.

Note: If concessions are won through collective action they need not lead to the illusions about the overall validity of the system that we associate with reformism. Any concession which helps free women from the traditional roles will make it easier to radicalize and politicize large numbers of women.

Women's role in this society is to maintain stability and security in the home - to leave politics, organization, and all general problems to men. It is because they accept this definition, and because they are atomised and dependent, that women are conservative relative to the working class as a whole. Women must fight for "reforms" to win the elementary freedom to become political - as a necessary part of building a movement.