

WHY "WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK" IS NOT ENOUGH. — SOME NOTES ON CD'S DOCUMENT. (KT. WLBF. MARCH '76)

1. I do not disagree with the fundamental ideas expressed in CD's document on Wages for Housework. I agree that the fundamental oppression of women in the current period of western capitalism is rooted in her role as a housewife. And that the class weakness of women has been fundamentally linked to her wagelessness. And these are the principle ideas which should guide our work.

2. In this general sense, I do not disagree with the idea of Wages for Housework as described in CD's document. However, it does not cover nearly enough of the ground needed for us to draw together a perspective on the class struggle of women, and the need for, or possibility of an autonomous women's movement.

3. If what we want is a perspective on women to provide us with the kind of tools needed to understand and organise in the current period, then we must take up the following points in the debate:

A) The change within the class struggle from a period where the main push of the class struggle was expressed through demands (higher wages, against rent rises, for equal pay, better conditions etc etc) to the current period where the question of forms of organisation begin to predominate (battered wives refuges, NAC local groups, cuts committees, use of the union by public sector workers etc).

B) The actual history and utter sectarianism of the Power of Women group (the group most closely linked to Wages for Housework in Britain); its lack of internal democracy etc etc.

C) The real potential for building an autonomous women's movement: an analysis of the National Abortion Campaign, Womens Aid, the accounts of struggles on Womens Struggle Notes.

4. I think A, B & C should be our main points for discussion following on from CD's document. However, there are some preliminary points:

i. I would in any case, be extremely sceptical about any perspective which can be summed up in 1 line or 3 words. A demand which in any period accurately sums up the mood and substance of that current struggle (such as We Won't Pay; Our Health is not for Sale; 40 hours pay, work or no work) is one thing. 3 words for all time and every situation is sterile and abstract politics.

ii. Power of Women is not alone in elevating the wage struggle to a timeless and meaningless level. Here is another example of the same thing: " ..Everywhere the same political characteristics of the wage struggle have emerged: in advanced England, backward Portugal, dependent Argentina, reformist Chile, and socialist China.... the working class has used "full-employment

anti-Fascism, Peron, Allende and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution for its wage initiative.. It is the immense income demand of the unwaged that has produced local growth and plans for economic development in Libya, Algeria, Iran, Venezuela, Indonesia, Nigeria." (quote from 'Notes on the International Crisis' by Mario Montano in Zerowork 1, p 34)

iii. In purely practical terms, I do not relish the thought of hours (days) spent discussion why our "Wages for Housework" is different from Power of Womens Wages for Housework.

iv. The association with Power of Women would do us a lot of harm at the moment because of their unpopularity and lack of credibility in the Womens Movement.

The Shift from Demands to Organisation

This is something I am not 100% sure of. However, I think its important to discuss in order to know how much emphasis to give a strict formulation of our political perspective of women. I think the question of how, politically we are to organise and how the working class is organised is an important way of knowing the real value of a "Wages for Housework" perspective.

It is interesting that in the National Abortion Campaign, a wide variety of narrow perspectives have been foisted on to the movement (i.e. the - 'Single Issue Campaign' from the League for Socialist Action; The International Socialist's Women and the Right to Work and right to organise for abortion only in factories and trade unions; The International Marxist Group and their idea that everything is linked to cuts via the wider labour movement etc etc). And yet most of these things have been ignored in favour of a practical local orientation around women's needs (i.e. organising for outpatient clinics, how to abortion; local bulletins and leaflets etc).

The limits of the NAC are that it lacks foresight and is unable to consolidate its gains very well as a movement. The advantages have been that it is flexible, that the central demands have been directly related both to a central part of the oppression of women - control over our bodies - and also rooted in the current contradictions of capitalism (new repressive legislation, the shift inside the labour party and support of women MPs etc)

But first, more examples of the shift to organisation idea: My contention is that we are experiencing a qualitative change in the class struggle. Since the mid-60s, the class struggle was dominated by the political demands of the working class for high wages, equal pay, our own demands in the womens movement for nurseries, against sex discrimination etc. And I think this was tied in a way, or at least still influenced by the dominant forms of organisation within the working class, particularly the trade unions and the Labour Party.

The demands quite clearly spilled over far beyond the reformist brim of the unions and the Labour Party, and this was particularly true of the Womens Movement, whose actual ties with reformism were always weak or non-existent. And it was a strength of the working class that during a period of the broad expansion of mass struggles (whose high point was '72 and '74) that demands could be fought for and won by using the old structures of the unions and Labour or broad based campaigns if necessary.

However, the picture is different now, The unions have become i integrated into the bosses use of the crisis, the Labour party even more so.

And the struggle of women has changed also. This is reflected in ~~xxx~~ the crisis inside the womens movement where concrete campaigns which burst out, quickly develop a base far stronger than the tentative demands of the womens movement. And if we look inside the activity of the womens movement women, the most pressing debate is no longer "which demands?" but "How do we get it?".

I am not suggesting a sort of stages view of struggle (ist the demand then the organising). But I am suggesting that the emphasis during this period of crisis is much more on how we organise a working class resistance and power.

I do not think this takes place at a general or even national level. I think the form this takes is predominantly localised but highly generalisable struggles. Like around the closure of a hospital or nursery or playgroup, lack of teachers, the need the outpatient abortion clinics, womens centres, refuges for battered women. The many smalee struggles around equal pay and the £6 at work; the housing and road fights from Womens Struggle Notes; even the fights for union recognition at work, against sackings and natural wastage. for health and safety and against the cuts.

In fact I think that the shift in the class struggle is the main thing that has produced such a crisis among the left (in terms of fragmentation, disunity, lack of working class perspective and declining working class credibility).

If your politics always tells you that unity is only brought about structurally through the Party (which has to make up campaigns like the Right to Work, or campaigns or collapsed demands like the Power of Womens use of Wages for Housework) then this period of struggle will quickly lead you up a few arseholes.

But if your politics understands (as I hope BF's does) that unity is a question of the strength and consciousness within struggles and the development of organic links links with other struggles and that the job of revolutionaries and revolutionary organisations during this period is to help develop that strength and consciousness then there's a chance that the working class can make use of the crisis for itself.

Or to put it another way.... How would it progress my work in the NAC to be able to say that we are really fighting for Wages for H Housework?. (From this point of view, * A Woman's Right to Choose has been a much better demand and in my experience in the hospital and in the streets has been useful in drawing together a working class response). But even more important for me in the NAC has been its local orientation. I have continually argued for local mass work, directed to women as women and concrete demands and perspectives linked to organising in the hospitals and with girls in schools, students, and women in shopping centres (housewives).

Also, how would Wages for Housework help my work in the hospital? In these situations, it is BF's understanding of the needs to organise with women as housewives, mothers, shit-workers in our area, to build a base, and also our understanding of the crisis and the cuts as well as the Right to Live which has generally guided my work. How would Wages for Housework make it any different?

B) The history of the Power of Women and Wages for Housework is long and tortuous. And I don't want particularly to write it all out. However, the assumptions in CDs document lead me to think that many BF women don't understand it very well.

I was in a claimants union and later lived in Notting Hill and got to know a lot about the struggle for playgroups and for women to get paid for running them. These are 2 examples of women getting money which have often been used by Selma James to prove things about wages for housework in ways that are both misleading and manipulative. In this way, there has been a strong tendency with wages for Housework to twist the struggle to prove the theory instead of letting the struggle speak for itself.

On the womens march this year, the Power of Women refused to join in any of the other slogans of the march, except when they attached Wages for Housework to the end. They altered the words of our abortion songs to include wages for Housework after every verse.. Power of women refuse to work in other campaigns like the WAC or Battered women or the Claimants unions.

They denounced Big Flame in public at a general womens meeting in South London and abused our sister there. Internally, the organisation is extremely undemocratic.

C) An autonomous womens movement?

I think we should look at the possibility of an autonomous womens movement developing and decide how we relate to it. So first

i. What has happened to the womens movement?

The womens movement as such is in crisis. The old movement, loosely structured around local womens groups and meeting in annual conferences is fragmented and without any coherent internal politics or dynamic. And the women and socialism tendency is not an alternative coherent force inside the movement.

And yet, the widespread nature of the class struggle of women in some ways has never been stronger. 6 or 7 years ago it was a brave and isolated woman who stood on the streets with leaflets for free nurseries and contraception, risking abuse ridicule and incomprehension from women as well as men.

Now, ideas of womens rights, women standing up for themselves, fighting for equality and for change - the fundamentals of feminism - are discussed openly and reach a wide a positive response among working class women.

Ideas about the liberation of women are no longer confined to a small section of women in the womens movement. To this extent the womens movement, by devious and sometimes obscure routes has managed to orientate its ideas towards the needs of working class women in general (i.e. the Family Allowance Campaign, Equal Pay, Battered women, contraception and abortion, child-care, housing)

For a long time, the womens movement ran alongside the movement of working class struggles. It was sectionalised, specialising in the demands and ideas of a particular section of women (young, radical, ex-student and professional women)

However, since the structure of the movement has withered away, womens groups and groups of women have faced more directly the needs of women in their areas or places of waged work.

5)

I think this can be seen in a number of ways - at the level of the battered womens movement; the NAC; and in smaller ways the involvement of womens groups in local housing and workplace struggles (see local womens papers in Brum, Nottingham, Luton, Bristol; see also Spare Rib also Womens Struggle Notes and Womens Voice etc). Also the fact that workshops at 2 womens conferences run by Big Flame women about organising with working class women have always had a really good response.

ii. What is an autonomous womens movement?

It is clear that an autonomous womens movement does not yet exist - consciously. However, I think that what I have outlined and many of the struggles we have collected in Womens Struggle Notes constitute a strong force against the needs of capitalism during the current situation. (I don't think this includes the Working women charter campaign which is too linked to the trade unions and reliance on reformism and which is dominated by the International Marxist Group and the International Communist League.)

Many of these struggles are strong because they are not dominated by trade unions and reformism, or by men, or by particular left groups. And they constitute part of the offensive within the working class movement.

This is why I think they are autonomous (i.e. autonomous in relation to capitalism, and a autonomous class position in relation to men, which means, I suppose, not totally separatist but lead and controlled by women for women and then ~~x~~ men support it on that basis, like the NAC).

iii). The seeds of an autonomous womens movement exist already. And I think that BF women should work within these struggles to strengthen their working class and revolutionary content.

The main reasons for doing this are that these seeds are far larger and more mass based than the practice of any revolutionary groups or even the sum total of revolutionary groups.

I look at it like this - 20,000 people marched on the NAC demo, most of them women. Hundreds of women are in womens groups, Womens Aid etc etc. all over the country. We should find ways of working openly with these women - our sisters in struggle - of strengthening the revolutionary feminist content of these struggles and constantly arguing and putting into practice a working class perspective within them.

iv. I don't think we can "set up" an autonomous womens movement (just like you can't set up a revolutionary party just because you want one). But I think we can fight for things which might be part of an autonomous womens movement in the future, since it is more probable that for a long time, many more women are likely to organise inside an autonomous structure like that than join revolutionary organisations.

I think this means Womens Centres, Womens Aid, NAC, Womens Action Groups, womens bulletins and for a feminist perspective in waged work and all that that means.....

CONCLUSIONS

One could say that all this means fighting in support of women as unwaged housewives, for the ideas of CDs document.. Perhaps it does. But to me, Wages for Housework doesn't say the half of it. And my conclusions at the moment is that our perspective is for the Right to Live, the struggle for Communism, and for an autonomous womens movement. And I see Wages for Housework as a demand among others like 'A Womans Right to Choose' 'We Won't Pay for the bosses crisis'; 'our health is not for sale' etc.

Or as someone might have said "The road to failed revolutions is paved with abstracted solutions".

To read

Last issue of Red Rag, a critique of All Work, No Pay (Power of Women book) by Barbara Taylor.
Section on Womens Struggles in Dossier '74.