

Women's Right to Work and the Labour Party - for a Big Flame position

R. Gardner - Norwich BF

This article documents the development of my own thinking about this campaign during the last year, and ends up arguing that BF women do need to take a clear position on how we proceed in the light of the LP's decision not to call a demonstration for "AWoman's Right to Work" or any other related or better slogan. Having a clear position in this campaign in terms of our overall political goals of building a feminist and pro-feminist socialist movement, is essential, because it highlights the relationship between our political goals and our method of organizing, and perhaps more specifically the kinds of links we do and don't want to have with the Labour Party.

1) The issues involved in the campaign

When I first heard about the Women's Right to Work campaign, at the BF Women's weekend last June, I thought it was an important initiative, and was something that as BF women, we should approach very seriously. It is true that the broad labour movement campaign against unemployment e.g. the People's March, has ignored the special problems of women with respect to paid work, e.g. lack of skills or unrecognized skills, low pay, part-time work, sex discrimination, child-care etc. Even more, it has not challenged an increasingly widely voiced view that women ought to take a back seat in the struggle to maintain jobs. A feminist campaign to give women a place in the struggle for jobs, which both recognizes the particular problems which women face, and seeks to alter the terms on which women seek and get jobs, could be a significant step forward for socialist feminism. It could mobilise many women who may not yet have been touched either by labour movement politics or by the women's movement.

"Could" is perhaps the operative word. At the women's weekend two central points were raised:

- i) How does the demand for jobs fit the real life experience of many working class women who can't take jobs because of childcare responsibilities etc. but who are deprived of an independent income because of marriage or cohabitation? This campaign does nothing for them.
- ii) The "Women's Right to Work" slogan is profoundly anti-feminist. How can feminists who have debated, analyzed, and campaigned in different ways over housework as an issue, who have been part of a movement in which, I believe, the term "waged work" was coined precisely because housework is unwaged yet nonetheless work, now ask for women to have the right to work? It is like feminists participating in a bad joke at the expense of our own politics. Its effect will be that lots of feminists who have not hitherto taken up issues connecting the labour movement with feminism, won't touch the campaign with a barge-pole.

My own view was (I think) in keeping with a general (though by no means unanimous) feeling at the women's weekend over both points. I think that (i) is a really important point but that the question of the obstacles which distinctively face women in getting jobs is nevertheless separate from, though not unconnected with that of a woman's right to an independent income. It seems to me likely that if there were adequate childcare facilities for everyone, if woman had more skills which could command a higher wage (or if women's skills commanded a higher wage) etc. that far many women who currently don't seek paid work would do so. In such a case the context of the demand for an independent income would change too. So improvements in the situation of those women who do now want paid work but can't get it, would actually change the situation for those women who don't now want jobs. In any case though, there are many women who do want paid work, and I felt there was a case for campaigning around women's employment/unemployment specifically despite also the very real importance of the problems facing women who don't want/can't have paid jobs.

As far as (ii) is concerned, the week-end seemed, rightly, pretty unanimous that BF women had to argue for the slogan "A Woman's Right to Waged Work". This came up again at the BF women's forum last autumn, but by then the problem of the slogan was seen as being linked with the overall character that the campaign was now taking, and the forms of mobilising for it that were being developed.

2) The basis of the call on the LP - for a massive demo or for massive tokenism?

At the forum we began to be reminded that this wasn't a feminist campaign insofar as the labour movement rather than the women's movement was determining its character. The Action Group which had come out of the May 1981 Festival for Women's Rights Against Tory Attacks, was calling on the LP to call the demo because, it was argued, the LP had the resources to mount a massive one. The Action Group, without a similar organisational base, couldn't do this. However, people in the LP didn't have the same understanding as feminists of the idea of waged work, and unwaged work, and the nature of housework.

At first I had accepted the reasons given for having a LP based campaign. I thought that not only might it mean a massive demo, it might also mean that the LP was taking this feminist issue seriously; it would be a victory for feminism within the labour movement. I naively found it impossible to imagine that the women supporting the BF views on changing the slogan would not win the vote when the issue was debated. But we did lose - clearly showing that a non-feminist conception of this campaign actually had precedence. But all the same, I thought, the LP will organise a massive demo - it's up to us to put the feminist case.

The February 20th mobilising meeting in London made me see the whole question of who was running the campaign, and what it was for, and what part socialist feminists could and should play in it in a different light. I now think that BF women must re-evaluate our entire participation in the campaign.

At the Feb. 20th meeting there was a lot of talk about the LP refusing to call a demonstration, and only wanting to organise an "event". Most women there were angry about this, but nevertheless the "event" was seen rather as a downgrading of the importance of the women's unemployment rather than as a total cop out. Only at 4.00 in my workshop, (and apparently not at all in other regional workshops) did it emerge that the proposed "event" was to be a Women's Rights Festival, which only referred to the "Right to Work" as one of several women's rights. This was much too late for us to be able to discuss the implications at that meeting.

My interpretation of this downgrading first of the feminist elements involved in the campaign, and then of the campaign itself both as to the scale of mobilisation (demo to festival) and then as to the key issue (women's unemployment to women's rights generally) is this:

- i) The reason for calling on the LP to call a demonstration is not because the LP guarantees massive demos, but because from the start, the majority of the Action Group had a politics which involves faith in labour movement institutions to mobilise, rather than in popular mobilisation and especially women's movement mobilisation forcing a response from labour movement leaders. So because the call went straight to the LP leadership rather than pushing that leadership from below, the LP was in a position to call a massive demonstration, but only if the leadership wanted to. They evidently do not. It is the opposite of the pressure from NAC on the TUC in the mobilisation for the 1979 anti-Corrie demonstration.
- ii) The LP has not been won to a feminist position on women's unemployment. The decision only to organise a general women's rights festival represents a desire by the Labour leadership involved not to antagonize powerful trade union feeling which sees women as threatening men's jobs. It means going along with "a man's place is in his union" and "a woman's place is in the home" philosophy.

In these circumstances, for a small Action Group to try to mobilise for a serious demonstration on its own, to coincide with the LP Festival, and even to culminate at the Festival, would be a bad mistake, quite apart from the date being a day before a major anti-Reagan disarmament demo. In the first place I don't think it could possibly be successful numerically. Secondly, and more importantly, even if it were, unless its politics actively challenged the LP and the barren tokenism of its proposed Festival, in the context in which it has been called, rather than using the Festival as a springboard for the demonstration, it would be seriously compromising any socialist feminist politics.

Let me stress that I am not opposed to the traditional labour movement mobilising on feminist issues, provided that they are genuine attempts (even if partial by our standards) by the labour movement to take up those issues in response to feminist demands. I do think the anti-Corrie TUC demo was an example of this.

I am opposed to strategies of calling on the Labour leadership to organize around demands they don't believe in in order to promote themselves with certain groups, only to be in a position to drop the issue when it suits them. We would thereby sacrifice building the strength of women generally, and working class women particularly within the labour movement, by relying on the leadership. I think that the developments within the Women's Right to Work campaign so far demonstrates that this not only can but does happen.

### 3) What should BF women do?

The issue is important for socialist feminists.

- i) BF women in the Action Group should argue against the Action Group calling a demonstration on June 5th, and should oppose participation in the LP Festival except on a clear "Women's Right to Waged Work" position. It should also insist on stating that the Action Group believe that the LP has let us down, using a leaflet and a workshop etc. at the Festival. I think that if this isn't accepted by the Action Group, then BF women should leave it.
- ii) I think that I've learned a lot from the concrete issues that have been discussed in the campaign so far, as well as over how we should organize this kind of thing in the future. There are lots of things that we could and should work on locally to press for action and understanding about women's employment/unemployment problems e.g. in unemployed centres, with school leavers. Things are happening in some areas. For instance in Lambeth a group is supporting the under-fives childcare campaign and linking it with the problems of women and paid work. There is also a Women and Unemployment group which recently held a day on women and unemployment to which 200 women came. Many of these were new to local political activity. NB that day was held locally and on a working day, not a weekend, so that many women who couldn't come to a weekend meeting were actually able to attend.
- iii) I think we need to be more careful about future calls on the LP to do our organising for us. We have been and still are willing to work in the TU movement. But we must always examine carefully the basis of our alliance over limited goals. This involves making sure that short term demands are compatible with long term goals e.g. "Defend the 1967 Abortion Act" is compatible with a longer term and more far-reaching goal of "Free Abortion on Demand". But it also means that we must examine the method of campaigning in terms of our ideas of popular participation in struggle. If the LP's method in a particular campaign involves reducing popular participation, then we have to bear in mind that that too is incompatible with our longer term political goals of getting people to take responsibility for and control over their own lives as a fundamental precondition of a socialist society.