

Women's Oppression, Feminism and the Left



An Alliance for Workers' Liberty Readings and Discussion pack £3
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Part 1: Feminist theories today

Feminism today is very fragmented. After Second Wave Feminism some of the political strands associated with that movement lived on and mutated. In the early 90s in academia, under the influence of post-modernism and among activists a new "generation" of feminism emerged.

"Third Wave" feminism, as it was known, drew on the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and developed some distinctive features.

- Was linked in academic circles to the growing popularity of post-modernism and post-structuralism and a con-

tinuing dialogue with different kinds of "identity" politics.

- Tended to be critical of essentialist definitions of gender and sexuality most closely associated with radical feminism and criticised by socialist feminists in the earlier period. Queer theory was important here.

- Marxist and materialist feminism was, alongside the activist Marxist left, in retreat. However there has been revival of interest in women's role in social reproduction (domestic labour, childcare, other non-waged labour)

A. Second Wave Feminism

Readings: When women fought for Liberation by Cathy Nugent and The seven demands of women's liberation movement.

The following article discusses the legacy of Second Wave feminism. It does not deal with one important criticism of all of the varieties of feminism in the 70s and 80s — that the movement was Eurocentric in outlook as well as being white and middle-class in sociological terms. This theme has become important to contemporary feminism.

Following the events of May in France, the biggest general strike in history, taking its inspiration from the bitter and explosive rebellion of black people in the USA, it had its roots in the students' movement and the struggle against the Vietnam war. What revolutionary movement was this? The women's liberation movement!

The struggles of 1968 came to represent for the militants of the day an irrepressible, kick-ass fighting attitude against capitalism and against all forms of oppression. The youthful desire of 1968 to smash the old order and replace it with something more human was to be a continual reference point for the women's liberation movement as well.

Looking back in 1979 Sheila Rowbottom described the galvanising effect of '68: "The energy which erupted in May 1968 was overwhelming. You could catch a glimpse of that extraordinary concentrated force of people's power to dissolve constraining structures which must be the subjective experience of a revolutionary process... Nothing seemed impossible... Capitalism was seen as claiming your whole being. We were all colonised and had to become total resisters. The focus was not only on production or even on a wider concept of class struggle but on oppression in everyday life — particularly the family and consumption."

The new women's movement was born anti-capitalist and involved many socialist women who, in their energetic debates, attempted to create a radical critique of capitalism and bourgeois existence which put the oppression of women centre stage. They were rediscovering, recreating and reassessing the old, rich literature of the early Marxist movement on the "Woman Question". They also attempted to go beyond it.

"Women's Lib" was a creative movement with a lasting impact. The original goals of the movement were only half won — we have a legal right to equal pay with men but are still low-paid — or not won at all, such as 24 hour nurseries under community control. Nonetheless a social revolution did take place. Women are much more sexually free for instance.

The women's revolution was only half a revolution, and it was never a world-wide revolution: although a few women may walk on the moon, millions of us still can't go out of our homes without having to cover our bodies from head to foot. Women were not affected equally by the revolution. Class and race continues to obstruct female emancipation.

These issues were discussed in the women's movement — at the level of theory at least. How to combine the categories of class and sex was the theoretical conundrum. The socialist feminist current made some progress towards constructing an integrated revolutionary theory. However by the end of the '70s this debate became arid, convoluted and confined to the breeze-block buildings of Britain's new universities. Yet the issues remain very relevant.

It wasn't all theory in the beginning: it was much more about picketing, postering, graffiti-ing, marching and fighting the police at the Miss World contest. And it wasn't just a middle class movement of ex-student women.

In the UK a fight in 1968 by fishermen's wives to improve the safety on trawlers showed working class women campaigning publicly and provided initial inspiration to the women's movement. It was only the latest, modern example of working class women fighting for their communities, in solidarity with men. Such a class struggle was seen again with Women Against Pit Closures and more recently with Women on the Waterfront.

A more important struggle of 1968 came from sewing machinists at Ford's in Dagenham, striking for equal pay. Equal pay became the first demand of the broader women's movement.

The modern women's movement was also impelled by social changes affecting working class women. From the end of the 1960s more and more women began to come into the workplace, a trend which will — all things being equal — continue into the next century. The experience made women more economically independent, brought them out of the isolated world of the "married home" and into the so-

Questions for discussion

- Why did the women's liberation movement emerge when it did?
- What contributed to the disintegration of the movement?
- What do you think of the demands raised by the women's movement? Would socialist feminists have similar demands today?
- What does it mean to call yourself a "socialist feminist" today?

cial world where they could shake off the constrictions of a life centred purely on family and private relationships. It helped women to recognise their own oppression. To a degree this has always been so.

At the end of the last century when women clattered down the Lancashire streets, on their way home from working at the textile factories, laughing at the men they worked with, with money in their pockets, confident and carefree, they may not have automatically recognised their own oppression. But, for some, it was natural to want more equality and to join the women's suffrage movement. They may also have joined unions or even parties like the Independent Labour Party.

The battles for class and sex equality have often coincided. So it was with the modern women's movement, with its origins in the social changes and anti-capitalist struggles of the late '60s. Yet by the end of the 1970s the radical and cultural feminists, for whom male dominance was the primary motor of history, had become the mainstream feminists. So much so that Andrea Dworkin was feted by the likes of Ken Livingstone and other leftists when she came to town.

What, then, happened to the socialist feminists? A number of political pressures and problems combined to ensure their eclipse. The American socialist feminists were influential. Although what they had to say was as interesting as their European sisters, their conception of socialism was more often influenced by Stalinism, Maoism, and the Marxism and professional sociology of academia. The combination of feminists with such a political background and the influence on European feminism of the quasi-Stalinism and Maoism of post-Trotsky Trotskyism and groups like Big Flame ["libertarian" Maoists] was lethal.

Most Marxists, socialists and Trotskyists of the '60s and the socialist feminists of the '70s were not able to get to grips with what was happening to the working class — in particular how the class would relate to the existing workers' parties, be that social democracy or the Communist Parties. Some Trotskyists looked for substitute revolutionary vanguards — the Maoists, the students etc. For some socialist feminists the vanguard was women. For instance Barbara Ehrenreich — an American socialist feminist — conflated the political and organisational defeat of the North American working class with the subjugation of women. She argued that this working class has been "atomised" and women as keepers of, tenders of, private existence have been central to this process: "Autonomy and creativity can only be expressed through our choice of furniture, or clothes or cigarettes." This may be a reasonable description of modern life but it takes no account of the responsibility of the workers' leaders for the defeated state of the class, its "atomisation" and apathy.

Instead of a strategy which aimed to transform the labour movement and make it fight for women's rights, the women's movement, Ehrenreich said, will be a new vanguard which can rebuild a class movement. Such ideas pushed in the direction of putting male and female struggles against capitalism into separate categories.

In the UK there was a continual ambiguity about how distinct socialist feminism should be as a political tendency on the left. Should it be a movement of women in socialist organisations? If the rest of the left was so sexist why not compete against it? Was socialist feminism to be an integral, caucusing, autonomous part of the left?

The discussion was complicated by the various confused attitudes of the left organisations. At one end of the spectrum of confusion was Militant, who only "discovered" feminism about the same time they left the Labour Party, in the 1990s! At the other end of the spectrum were the International Marxist Group (IMG) who, to their credit, were at least involved in the movement from the start. They had a women's paper — Socialist Woman — which, though it

may have covered socialist feminist debate, appeared to have no political life independent of the socialist feminist current.

Then there was the hot/cold, sectarian/opportunist attitude of the International Socialists. Individual women in IS were involved but it was not until the mid-'70s that their group saw the movement as anything connected to "real struggle". Eventually the IS, (by then the Socialist Workers' Party) started their own paper, Women's Voice, which set up discussion groups with independent life. At this point the SWP shut down Women's Voice. Clearly it was becoming unreliable at what it was set up for — to be a recruiting front.

There is a more simple explanation for the problems the socialist feminist movement had in trying to establish a collective identity. They were under pressure from both sides. It's not very pleasant being called a "bloody feminist", "precious", etc., etc., from out-of-date lefties. But it's more annoying to be described as — words to this effect — a bimbo from the "male dominated socialist movement" who can't think for herself and has been brain-washed by those nasty Leninists. It was a bit rich when members of the Communist Party (!) in alliance with a group of radical feminists pushed that line against female Workers' Liberty supporters in the student movement at the end of the 1980s. But by that point the chances and opportunities were over for socialist feminism to develop as a strong and coherent political current with which the revolutionary socialist left could have made a healthy united front.

Workers' Liberty's forerunners tried to work out a way of being Trotskyists, working class socialists — to intervene sensitively in the movement but at the same time forthrightly. We got involved in National Abortion Campaign and the campaign around the Working Women's Charter, but it took a long time to think of a way to take the initiative. In March 1982 we did initiate a conference — Fightback for Women's Rights. Bringing together 500 women, including single issue equality campaigns such as NAC and Women's Aid, and focusing on the rights of working class women it was an attempt to lay the basis for mass campaigning work under the new Tory government and to find the links between the goals and aspirations of socialist feminists and the needs and demands of working-class women. The conference came at a time when many socialist feminists were changing direction and were joining the Labour Party in order to be part of a struggle for democracy and political regeneration inside the political wing of the labour movement.

From this point on the fate of socialist feminism is more closely bound up with the history of the left both inside and outside the Labour Party. For a time the struggles of socialist feminists in the Labour Party women's sections looked like being crucial in the battle to regenerate the labour movement. The women's sections were often more radical than the mainstream of the party — they opposed the Falklands War for instance. Organisations like the Women's Action Committee argued for greater representation for Labour Party women but their strategy foundered when the leadership of WAC chose not to link up with the fight to get Labour's leaders to oppose the Tory cuts.

When much of the left — Ken Livingstone when he was leader of the GLC for instance — backtracked from the fight against restrictions on local government spending, the consequences were damaging for the cause of socialist feminism. Money for community projects to help the oppressed — women, black people, lesbians and gays — became the hallmark of GLC "radicalism". Fighting the Tories fell off the agenda. Some socialist feminists, along with much of the Labour left, fell in with the strategy of putting off the fight — they raised the rates, they introduced the "dented shield" [policy of making "selective" cuts now while "holding out" for a Labour government], they implemented the

poll tax. Suddenly there was no longer any women's centres. Finally International Women's Week became an aromatherapy/reflexology fest.

Leading socialist feminist, Hilary Wainwright, went off to help found the Socialist Movement — an amorphous movement, founded in the wake of Kinnock's counterrevolution in the Labour Party, whose members were all committed to "socialism" but were not invited to debate how to achieve socialism.

There was nothing inevitable about the retreat of the left or socialist feminism. When the women from the mining communities started to organise themselves as a powerful battalion in the strike the left in the Labour Party, its sisters too, rallied round. It was a fantastic example of working class women organising and could have given socialist feminism a reason for existence for many years to come. The strike was defeated, and it was not to be.

While it lasted the socialist feminist current in the women's movement was a genuine attempt to rethink and to rediscover a socialist past. So many questions...

What is the role of the family under capitalism? Did women's labour in the family constitute productive labour? What could we learn from the experience of the Russian Revolution? Could we socialise housework and childcare? What would the family have looked like under socialism?

From Kollontai [Alexandra; leading Bolshevik who eventually capitulated to Stalin] the socialist feminists claimed the idea that revolutionary transformation included all aspects of human existence. After the revolution personal relationships would be more equal and humane. The issues surrounding Kollontai's writing were discussed. How can we take these ideas as prescriptions for the future if they have emerged from an historical experience that was flawed and difficult.

Socialist feminists had to confront their own utopian instincts. The personal and emotional aspects of the women's movement were difficult to deal with. Over-concern with issues of psychological health risked charges of middle-class life-stylism. A lack of concern with what oppression feels like was a point of agitation against the Marxist organisations — and a reasonable point of agitation no doubt when socialist men felt they could call you "girl" or "love" and get away with it.

Some feminists, such as Juliet Mitchell and Lynne Segal, used a psychoanalytical framework as a source of intellectual ideas for socialist feminism. Reich, who most clearly linked societal exploitation and oppression with repression, was rediscovered by the left. The concept of repression as a controlling mechanism in the construction of female sexuality was popular.

The debate on sexuality was a response to the radical feminists. In the mid-70s the national conference of the women's liberation movement had adopted a new demand — the "right of women to a self-defined sexuality". For radical feminists the idea of a freely chosen sexuality (if such a thing is possible) could be skewed to mean that only a sexuality freely chosen as lesbian, and strictly separate from men, was liberating. The socialist feminists made a defensive response.

Another issue was how ideological sexism related to economic life, to production. A sometimes Stalinist distortion of Marxist political economy obscured the debate — "Marxism says in the final analysis the superstructure is determined by the economic base" — that sort of thing. The crude mis-reading led to ideological back flips — an idealistic view of society where consciousness determines being. The notion of an integrated class struggle, of fighting on all fronts — the economic, political and ideological — could have been an antidote to both the "economic determinist" view and the idealistic view, but that modal of class struggle was simply not available from the socialist movement.

Sometimes there was a demand to put a socialist feminist

stamp on everything: anti fascism, health, Ireland, trade unions. Everything had to be intricately scrutinised, "added-in", deliberately, audited for content. There was an overwhelming self-consciousness to our feminism in those days. In the end some feminists, tired of trying to integrate class and sex chose to make it separate — equal but different, as the old male chauvinist expression goes. The writings of Heidi Hartman et al exemplified this political choice: society was made up of two systems, one divided by patriarchy the other by class.

The ideas of socialist feminism are still relevant. We desperately need political signposts to guide us through the contradictory nature of the changes which have occurred in the relationships between the sexes. By the end of the century as many women as men will be in waged work. This women's work has a critical role in the restructuring of capitalism. The left has scarcely begun to analyse these changes. Should we turn once again to Marx's Capital? Re-reading his [copious] notes about work for nimble fingers, in areas of the economy where unions scarcely existed and where low wages were so low they were used to drive down the wages of the whole working class, it seems things have hardly changed!

The central focus of all the socialist feminist debates was the family — they had an alternative vision of a society where social chaos could be replaced by rational, humane and equal relationships, where there could be a myriad of "family" relationships, but freely chosen. In capitalist societies, where existing family relationships are visibly disintegrating, without social institutions of any kind to replace them, we need alternatives to the various moral panics from the right and the so-called liberal establishment.

Everything changes, everything stays the same. We live in a world where abortion rights may be established but discussion of abortion is still taboo. Women may no longer be prepared to be wife slaves, serving their man's meal up on the dot of 6.30, but we are still slaves to our children, taking the lioness's share of responsibility for childcare.

In the end it is working class women who still have a world to win. "Juggling" with the nanny, the job and the taps to the gym are simply not the same as being exhausted by poverty wages, insecurity and the constant worry that your kids will face a future of unemployment, poverty and despair.

The sexual confidence that young working class women have today has brought us closer to the original goal of the women's liberation movement. This progress has even affected women with religious backgrounds, albeit in a contradictory way — platform shoes peeking out from underneath purdah. Yet as long as capitalism makes women into commodities that look like stick insects we are still quite far away from getting our sexual freedom. Nothing has changed... only socialism in the end can liberate humanity, lay the basis for the liberation of women and guarantee every individual man or woman can be creative, whole and free.

The seven demands of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The women's liberation movement asserts a woman's right to define her own sexuality, and demands:

- Equal pay for equal work
- Equal education and job opportunities
- Free contraception and abortion on demand
- Free 24-hour community-controlled childcare
- Legal and financial independence for women
- An end to discrimination against lesbians
- Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of male violence. An end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women.

B. Liberal and Radical Feminism

Readings:

- Policy Briefing by the Fawcett Society, on Sex and Power, October 2011.
- What is patriarchy? Definition from the London Feminist Network website.
- Speech by Finn Mackay from 2010.

Liberal feminism is represented in the UK by the apparently growing Fawcett Society. Concentrating on legal reform and government lobbying it is sometimes focused exclusively on female equality and sometimes uses the language of “human rights”.

There is some overlap with today’s radical feminism (in terms of the groups who work within leading feminist NGOs). UK Feminista for example is an amalgam of liberal and radical feminism.

Radical feminists continue to focus on patriarchy (although this is less clear cut than the radical feminism of the 1970s and 80s). They also heavily focus on sexual objectification and violence against women.

The liberal- radical feminist amalgam was incorporated into New Labour’s policy-making when in government.

Fawcett Society report

The latest findings of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s Sex and Power report reflect the slow progress of women to positions of power and influence.

Sex and Power’s findings show that in sectors where women’s representation in top posts has increased (compared to 2007/81), the increases have been small in most areas and in many cases attributable to just one or two women joining senior posts. Moreover, there have been drops in women’s participation in 10 sectors including:

- Members of Cabinet;
- National Assembly for Wales;
- Local authority council leaders;
- Public appointments;
- Health service Chief Executives.

Currently, only five out of 23 Government ministers in Cabinet are women, signalling a 10 year low. Of 119 Government ministers, including the Cabinet, whips, Lords in waiting and 12 unpaid positions, 20 (17%) are women. The EHRC estimates that it will take another 14 general elections- up to 70 years — to achieve an equal number of women MPs. The lack of women at the top table of politics sends a clear signal to other walks of life: it is acceptable to cut women out from positions of power.

Fawcett’s recommendations

1. Fawcett recommends that Government must lead the response, first and foremost by ensuring that Prime Minister David Cameron honours his commitment to ensure that by the end of his first Parliament, a third of all ministerial

places are held by women. Fawcett’s research shows that current economic policy is disproportionately affecting women through cuts to jobs and benefits and resulting in women filling the gaps where services and benefits no longer reach.

Political decisions of national importance and consequence are still being made with too few women in the room.

2. Fawcett believes that radical action is needed to be taken by political parties. The potential effects of boundary changes coupled with the expected low numbers of retiring MPs at the next General Election (2015) means that women’s representation is unlikely to increase in 2015.

In fact, ensuring that women’s representation does not decrease in 2015 will be considered success. Nearly a century on from women winning the vote, the rate of progress is simply not happening at an acceptable pace. In order to redress the current gender imbalance in political life, Fawcett recommends that political parties adopt party specific equality guarantees to increase the number of women within their parties.

3. Sex and Power concludes that where women do find positions of power and influence, it is more likely to be in the public and voluntary sectors. For example, women make up 48% of Chief Executives in the Voluntary sector. Fawcett is concerned that Government cuts to permanently shrink the size of the public sector will jeopardise women’s employment opportunities in the short and longer term.

The private sector has historically failed to adapt to women’s maternity and care needs nearly as well as the public sector (i.e. by providing good quality flexible and part-time work opportunities). This is illustrated by the (full time) pay gaps figures: 11.6% in public sector, 20.8% in private sector. Fawcett recommends that the private sector could learn from the public sector’s success in ensuring that women reach the top positions of power.

Fawcett supports Government’s current proposals to reform the parental leave system and extend the right to flexible working to all employees as a way of tackling indirect and direct discrimination that women routinely face in the workplace and of smashing the glass ceiling that prevents women from reaching the top positions of power in public life.

What is patriarchy?

Patriarchy is the term used to describe the society in which we live today, characterised by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly noticeable in women’s under-representation in key state institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment and industry. Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy. Women in minority groups face mul-

Questions for discussion

- Does the “gender imbalance in political life”? (highlighted by the Fawcett Society) matter?
- What do you think of the Fawcett Society’s description of the gender pay gap?
- What do you think of the description of patriarchy here? Is it accurate...or not?
- List the most important aspects of Finn Mackay’s feminism. Which would you endorse, which would you reject?
- Do you think there is a “natural” political alliance between radical and liberal feminism?

tiple oppressions in this society, as race, class and sexuality intersect with sexism for example.

Speech by Finn Mackay

Finn Mackay describes herself as a “radical lesbian feminist”. She is a leading figure in The London Feminist Network.

Our movement is on the rise in our country again, in this capital city, in those of the Celtic nations and beyond. And as it grows, it is no surprise that we see debate grow about its’ role and form. Over this year I have heard much debate about whether feminism needs to be rebranded. As if a movement that has given us all the advances we today take for granted is something we should be ashamed of. That we can work in many different industries, that we have access to education, that domestic violence is considered a crime, that we can open our own bank accounts. As if a legacy of support services, rape crisis centres, refuges, nurseries, women’s centres, helplines and advocacy provisions that continue to support women, children and men today, are something that we should be embarrassed about. Feminism does not need re-branding, it needs re-claiming, and this is something that all of us can do.

This is not to say that this is easy, in a culture of backlash against feminism.

Where the term is considered a dirty word, where misogyny and homophobia restrict women in claiming this movement for themselves. And because misogyny and homophobia are prejudices that we must confront, we must question why women do not identify with feminism, rather than accept and endorse the lies and stereotypes that are told about feminism and feminists.

Feminism is a global political movement to challenge and change women’s subordination to men. But time and again we hear people say that feminism is just about women making their own choices, regardless of what those choices are, or what bumpy, un-level playing field they make those decisions in. We are told that practically every woman who wakes up in the morning and makes a decision is a feminist, or those who have jobs, or money. While indeed it is true that any woman can be a feminist, feminism has to mean something, otherwise it risks meaning nothing.

We must remind people that ours is a political movement, it is serious. It is not about a trip to the health spa, a flattering trouser suit or a pole-dancing class. Our politics are literally about life and death. Two women every week in our country are murdered by a violent male partner, who on average will serve around four years in prison. One in four women are victim to rape in their lifetime, while only one out of every twenty reported rapes result in a conviction. Because we are feminists we do not believe that nineteen out of every twenty women who report rape are liars. Because we are feminists we do not believe that the rape crisis in our country is the amount of false reports, because we are feminists we believe women and we join together in our movement to demand justice.

The goal of challenging male supremacy, which we call patriarchy, requires collaboration with many other struggles, and contrary to the lies told about the herstory of our movement, this is something we have always done. Because women are the poorest of the poor in every country in the world, including our own, we know what capitalism is responsible for. And feminism has much to contribute, politically, theoretically and in activism – to the global struggle for alternatives to capitalism and especially now, in defending our welfare and public services, on which women and children depend disproportionately.

Most of us, as feminists, many of you here today, are already involved in these struggles and many others – against racism, for peace and the environment. Many of us stand

alongside men in these movements, including our own, working together in solidarity. And the role of men in our movement is another issue that has seen much debate over the past year.

Of course, all men have a role to play in the struggle for women’s liberation. For example, they can stop rape, by not raping women. They can bring the sex industry to its’ knees by not buying women in prostitution or consuming pornography. They can remove their lucrative patriarchal pound from the institutions that are oppressing us and demeaning them.

Our pro-feminist brothers can further this aim by challenging other men. By picketing lap-dancing clubs and other such establishments, by putting themselves on the line, just as women have to do, every day, both in those clubs and without – on the streets, in our workplaces, in our homes.

But however men are involved in this movement, I suggest one place they should certainly not be is in the leadership, because I believe that women should lead and direct the women’s movement. And this is a political stance, one all too often reduced to so-called “man-hating” by those who do not appreciate the grand scale of woman-hating that goes uncommented and unchecked in our society on a daily basis.

As the late Andrea Dworkin maintained, we are not feminists because we hate men, we are feminists because we believe in men’s humanity, against all evidence to the contrary.

But protecting our women-only spaces is just another struggle we are forced to confront, as this vital place for organisation, resistance and recovery continues to come under attack and is fast disappearing. All oppressed groups should have the right to political self-organisation and ours should be no exception. We should not be made to justify or apologise for women-only space; one our most dynamic tactics for change that we have built up over the decades and which our movement has been built upon.

So, I hope that today you have found groups and causes that you are interested in and to get active in. I hope you have realised today that you are not alone, and that you never doubt that what you do makes a difference, because it does.

Every time you raise your voice in resistance, you add it to countless others and you make them count. The women who can’t be here, the women who said no and were ignored, the women who didn’t make it. I know that there are women in this room who have survived horrendous violence, once, twice or many times. Your bravery should never be your shame, and all of us must loudly contradict and challenge a society that puts onto women, its own shame, for the crimes it condones. And whether we have experienced these crimes or not, all of us are trying to survive, trying to thrive through the lie, that we are worth less than a man. And the reason so many forces are stacked against us, why mockery, silencing and threat is used to repress us is because of the fear that the sleeping dragon that is our 52% majority will open her eyes and take her power back.

Male supremacy is in fact fairly tenuous; a great bulk of it has to be maintained through the exertion of violence, including the violence of poverty and marginalisation. It is also maintained through ideological means, through sexual objectification, through the stifling constraints of femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. It is nothing short of revolutionary to suggest that this ancient power relationship can be taken apart; but that’s why we’re here. Because we know that male supremacy is neither natural nor inevitable, because it must, can and will be changed, and we, are going to do it.

C. Anarcha-feminism

Some anarcha-feminists would see anarchism as inherently feminist, that is if anarchism is a struggle against all kinds of power. One historical model is the anarchist women's organisations *Mujeres Libres* — founded in Spain in 1936. However the historical model does not have much connection to the activities of anarcha-feminists today which tend to concentrate on small-scale anti-capitalist activities.

As anarcha-feminism is based on a “double struggle” for women's liberation and social revolution there is common ground with socialist feminists.

Reading: From Edinburgh Anarcha feminist website. This discusses how the anarchist movement views feminism, reprinting a statement by a group of anarcha feminists who made an intervention at an anarchist conference using a video *No Pretense*.

The film can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCJfsYzzHh0&feature=player_embedded

From Edinburgh Anarchists

Isn't anarchism essentially feminist, with its central aim of abolishing hierarchy and creating equality? While theoretically it should be, in reality anarchist organisations and people claiming to be anarchists consistently ignore (or worse, outright deny the existence of) gender oppression. The problem of gender is rarely an integral part of anti-capitalist and anti-racist discourse and struggle.

A look at history shows us that the anarchist movement has not considered feminism one of its major concerns. Although Bakunin, for example, advocated complete equality between woman and men and denounced the contradiction in many male militants who fought for socio-economic equality and freedom while being tyrants at home, Proudhon, on the other hand, pillar of the libertarian movement, was a notorious misogynist.

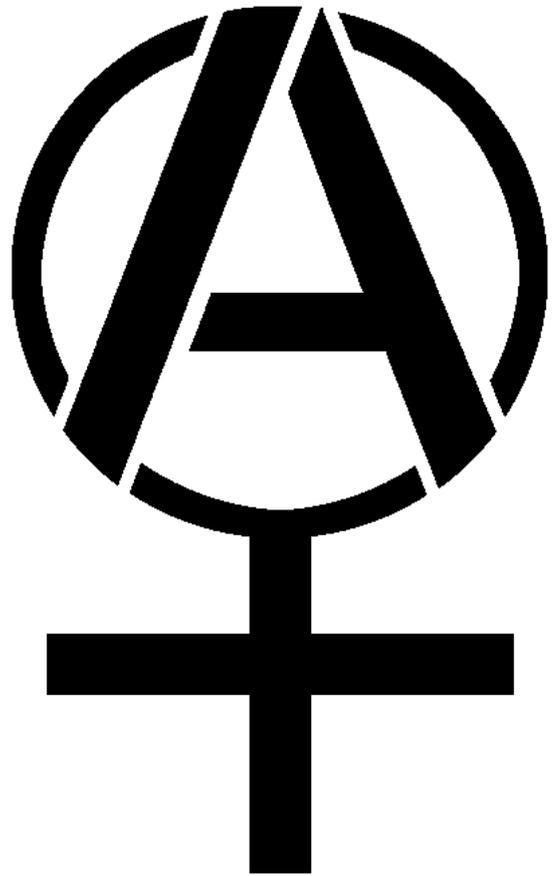
This author of a sentences like “the woman is a pretty animal but an animal nonetheless. She is as eager for kisses as a goat is for salt,” is still the master thinker for many. There have always been homophobic anarchists, as well, who argue that homosexuality represents a “bourgeois perversion.”

Emma Goldman described the obstacles against her when she raised this issue: “Censorship came from some of my own comrades because I was treating such ‘unnatural’ themes as homosexuality,” she related in 1912. The shell of the idea of sexual liberation has often been resuscitated but without its anti-patriarchy value. For most militants, in 1936 as in 1970, it has meant above all the sexual availability of women militants and feminists for meeting male desires.

Statement from No Pretense Group

MOVEMENT or why we aren't one:

No matter how much we aspire to be “self-critical” there is



a clear lack of theorising and concrete action around sexism, homophobia and racism in the anarchist movement. We do not feel that the content and structure of the conference deal with gender and we're tired of asking for space — we're taking it ourselves.

You want to talk about history? Let's stop pretending that feminism is a short blip in the history of political struggles. The feminism you know may be the one that has been dominated by white middle-class liberal politics — NOT the struggles and pockets of revolutionary resistance missing from our political pamphlets and “independent” media. The feminism of Comandanta Yolanda, of bell hooks, of Anzaldúa, of Mbuya Nehanda, of Angela Davis, of Rote Zora, of *Mujeres Libres*...

CLASS or is anybody out there?

We are all oppressed by the class system, but there is nobody “out there” who isn't also oppressed by white supremacy, imperialism, heterosexism, patriarchy, ableism, ageism...Pretending these systems don't exist or can be subsumed into capitalist oppression, doesn't deal with the problem, it just silences those people most oppressed by them, and allows for the continuing domination of these systems over our lives.

We are tired of being told that anarchists don't need to be feminists, because “anarchism has feminism covered”. This is just a convenient way of forgetting the reality of gender

Questions for discussion

- Is there any underlying analysis of how the world is organised in this reading. If so, what is it?
- What do you think about the problem of sexism identified here. To what extent is this true of the whole of the left?
- Is there any political overlap between anarcha-feminism and other forms (or groups) of feminists?

oppression, and so ignoring the specifics of the struggle against it.

RESISTANCE or are we futile?

If the anarchist movement doesn't recognize the power structures it reproduces, its resistance will be futile. For as well as fighting sexism "out there" we must fight sexism "in here" and stop pretending that oppressive systems disappear at the door of the squat or the social centre. Only a movement that understands and fights its own contradictions can provide fertile ground for real and effective resistance.

Ask yourselves this — do you believe sexism exists within the movement? When a woman comrade says she's experienced sexual abuse or assault from a male comrade — what do you think? That it's an individual or an isolated case? Or that it can happen — and disproportionately to women — because there is a system which allows it to develop and gives it life? Can we honestly say that our own autonomous spaces do not play a part in upholding this system?

Ask yourselves this — Why do fewer women speak in meetings? Because they think less? What is the gender of the factory worker? Why do more women do the washing up and run creches at meetings/events? What is the gender of the carer at home?

Now tell us if you believe sexism exists: tell us why men rape; why more women are battered than men; why more women are used by the state to do free and unwaged work. Tell us — are you a feminist?

We believe that in the anarchist movement, the strongest evidence of sexism lies in the choice we're told to make between 'unity' and what-they-call 'separatism', between fighting the state and fighting sexism. Fuck that! We refuse to be seen as stereotypes of "feminists" you can consume — like fucking merchandise in the capitalist workplace.

IDEAS INTO REALITY and what's in between?

There will be no future for the anarchist movement if it doesn't also identify as an anarcha-feminist movement. Anarcha-feminist organisational structures must exist within the movement to make anarcha-feminism an integral part of it. And you don't need to identify as a woman to be an anarcha-feminist — every anarchist should be able to participate in the struggle against sexism.

The state's incursion into our private lives and the relationship between sexuality and productivity from which it profits affects people of all genders. The gender binary system violently allocates us roles on the basis of our anatomy. A refusal to accept even these basic precepts will be a great hindrance to the movement.

You ask, 'Can we find common cause despite our differences?'. We will only find common cause if we recognize that our differences are structured by numerous oppressive systems, and together fight to end each of these systems, wherever we find them.

Our feminisms must be plural, they must be anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic. Our inspiration must come from the actions of feminists who have helped self-identified women reach revolutionary consciousness.

Our feminisms must be revolutionary.

D. Socialist feminism

Workers' Liberty is socialist feminist. To us that means a Marxist analysis of class exploitation which also integrates an analysis of the origins and mechanisms of sexual and other oppressions. Women's oppression is rooted in a sexual division of labour which intersects with (rather than exists alongside) class exploitation.

But "socialist feminism" has also been a broader category of academic and activist feminism and many socialist feminists criticised Marxism for being "reductionist".

The following reading is by Barbara Ehrenreich, an American socialist feminist. She is a Marxist but in a number of respects, Ehrenreich and other socialist feminists have very different politics to those of the AWL. The reading does demonstrate the desire of many who see themselves as broadly socialist feminist to establish a higher profile for their politics.

Reading: extract from an article by Barbara Ehrenreich. Full article <http://monthlyreview.org/2005/07/01/what-is-socialist-feminism>

... I don't want to leave socialist feminist theory as a "space" or a common ground. Things are beginning to grow in that "ground." We are closer to a synthesis in our understanding of sex and class, capitalism and male domination, than we were a few years ago. Here I will indicate only very sketchily one such line of thinking:

1. The Marxist/feminist understanding that class and sex domination rest ultimately on force is correct, and this remains the most devastating critique of sexist/capitalist society. But there is a lot to that "ultimately." In a day to day sense, most people acquiesce to sex and class domination without being held in line by the threat of violence, and often without even the threat of material deprivation.

2. It is very important, then, to figure out what it is, if not the direct application of force, that keeps things going. In the case of class, a great deal has been written already about why the US working class lacks militant class consciousness. Certainly ethnic divisions, especially the black/white division, are a key part of the answer. But I would argue, in addition to being divided, the working class has been socially atomized.

Working-class neighborhoods have been destroyed and are allowed to decay; life has become increasingly privatised and inward-looking; skills once possessed by the working class have been expropriated by the capitalist class; and capitalist controlled "mass culture" has edged out almost all indigenous working-class culture and institutions. Instead of collectivity and self-reliance as a class, there is mutual isolation and collective dependency on the capitalist class.

3. The subjugation of women, in the ways which are characteristic of late capitalist society, has been key to this process of class atomisation. To put it another way, the forces which have atomised working-class life and promoted cultural/material dependence on the capitalist class are the same forces which have served to perpetuate the subjugation of women.

It is women who are most isolated in what has become an increasingly privatised family existence (even when they work outside the home too).

It is, in many key instances, women's skills (productive skills, healing, midwifery, etc.), which have been discredited or banned to make way for commodities.

It is, above all, women who are encouraged to be utterly passive/uncritical/dependent (i.e., "feminine") in the face of the pervasive capitalist penetration of private life. Historically, late capitalist penetration of working-class life has singled out women as prime targets of pacification/"feminization"—because women are the culture-bearers of their class.

4. It follows that there is a fundamental interconnection between women's struggle and what is traditionally conceived as class struggle. Not all women's struggles have an inherently anticapitalist thrust (particularly not those which seek only to advance the power and wealth of special groups of women), but all those which build collectivity and collective confidence among women are vitally important to the building of class consciousness. Conversely, not all class struggles have an inherently antisexist thrust (especially not those that cling to preindustrial patriarchal values), but all those which seek to build the social and cultural autonomy of the working class are necessarily linked to the struggle for women's liberation.

This, in very rough outline, is one direction which socialist feminist analysis is taking. No one is expecting a synthesis to emerge which will collapse socialist and feminist struggle into the same thing. The capsule summaries I gave earlier retain their "ultimate" truth: there are crucial aspects of capitalist domination (such as racial oppression) which a purely feminist perspective simply cannot account for or deal with — without bizarre distortions, that is. There are crucial aspects of sex oppression (such as male violence within the family) which socialist thought has little insight into — again, not without a lot of stretching and distortion. Hence the need to continue to be socialists and feminists. But there is enough of a synthesis, both in what we think and what we do for us to begin to have a self-confident identity as socialist feminists.

• Further reading: *The Socialist Feminist Project: A Contemporary Reader in Theory and Politics* edited by Nancy Holmstrom

Questions for discussion

- What do you make of Ehrenreich's description of "late capitalism" ("atomisation" etc)? Is this description of working-class/women's lives accurate.
- What do you make of Ehrenreich's idea of a synthesis between working-class and feminist struggles?

E. Judith Butler

The following reading is by the influential academic feminist Judith Butler. Her arguments (which are only really touched on here) are worth discussing at face-value; but what kind of feminism is this? It is influenced by post-modernism. But as socialist feminist Lynne Segal argues Butler is part of a broader group for whom the focus has become more microscopic: "Feminists have moved from grand theory to local studies, from cross-cultural analysis of patriarchy to the complex and historical interplay of sex, race and class, from notions of a female identity or the interests of women towards the instability of female identity and the active creation and recreation of women's needs and concerns."

Reading: extracts from an interview with Judith Butler by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, London. Full version originally published in *Radical Philosophy* 67 (summer 1994).

RP: [Where do you] place your work within the increasingly diverse field of gender studies. Most people associate your recent writings with what has become known as "queer theory". But the emergence of gay and lesbian studies as a discrete disciplinary phenomenon has problematised the relationship of some of this work to feminism. Do you see yourself primarily as a feminist or as a queer theorist, or do you refuse the choice?

Butler: I would say that I'm a feminist theorist before I'm a queer theorist or a gay and lesbian theorist. My commitments to feminism are probably my primary commitments. *Gender Trouble* was a critique of compulsory heterosexuality within feminism, and it was feminists that were my intended audience.

At the time I wrote the text there was no gay and lesbian studies, as I understood it. When the book came out, the Second Annual Conference of Lesbian and Gay Studies was taking place in the USA, and it got taken up in a way that I could never have anticipated. I remember sitting next to someone at a dinner party, and he said that he was working on queer theory. And I said: What's queer theory? He looked at me like I was crazy, because he evidently thought that I was a part of this thing called queer theory. But all I knew was that Teresa de Lauretis had published an issue of the journal *Differences* called "Queer Theory". I thought it was something she had put together. It.. never occurred to me that I was a part of queer theory.

...I think there's some anti-feminism in queer theory. Also, insofar as some people in queer theory want to claim that the analysis of sexuality can be radically separated from the analysis of gender, I'm very much opposed to them. The... *Gay and Lesbian Reader* ... begins with a set of articles that make that claim. I think that separation is a big mistake. Catharine MacKinnon's [radical feminist who campaigned for pornography bans and was important context for development of Third Wave feminism] work sets up such a reductive causal relationship between sexuality and gender

that she came to stand for an extreme version of feminism that had to be combatted. But it seems to me that to combat it through a queer theory that dissociates itself from feminism altogether is a massive mistake.

RP: Could you say something more about the sex-gender distinction? Do you reject it or do you just reject a particular interpretation of it? ...

Butler: One of the interpretations that has been made of *Gender Trouble* is that there is no sex, there is only gender, and gender is performative. People then go on to think that if gender is performative it must be radically free. And it has seemed to many that the materiality of the body is vacated or ignored or negated here — disavowed, even... So what became important to me in writing *Bodies that Matter* was to go back to the category of sex, and to the problem of materiality, and to ask how it is that sex itself might be construed as a norm. Now, I take it that's a presupposition of Lacanian psychoanalysis — that sex is a norm. But I didn't want to remain restricted within the Lacanian purview. I wanted to work out how a norm actually materialises a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm.

...I think that I overrode the category of sex too quickly in *Gender Trouble*. I try to reconsider it in *Bodies That Matter*, and to emphasise the place of constraint in the very production of sex.

RP: A lot of people like *Gender Trouble* because they liked the idea of gender as a kind of improvisational theatre, a space where different identities can be more or less freely adopted and explored at will. They wanted to get on with the work of enacting gender, in order to undermine its dominant forms. However, at the beginning of *Bodies That Matter* you say that, of course, one doesn't just voluntaristically construct or deconstruct identities. It's unclear to us to what extent you want to hold onto the possibilities opened up in *Gender Trouble* of being able to use transgressive performances such as drag to help decentre or destabilise gender categories, and to what extent you have become sceptical about this.

Butler: The problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. One ought always to be wary of one's examples. What's interesting is that this voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere. There's a desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body. But no, I don't think that drag is a paradigm for the subversion of gender. I don't think that if we were all more dragged out, gender life would become more expansive and less restrictive. There are restrictions in drag. In fact, I argued toward the end of the book that drag has its own melancholia.

It is important to understand performativity — which is distinct from performance — through the more limited notion of resignification. I'm still thinking about subversive repetition, which is a category in *Gender Trouble*, but in the place of something like parody I would now emphasise the complex ways in which resignification works in political

Questions for discussion

- What do you make of Butler's description or idea of "gender", "sex" and "sexuality"?
- What do you think about her idea of "subversion" (e.g. of sexual norms). Is it very subversive? Can you think of concrete examples of this kind of "subversive politics"?

discourse.

[...] It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject. The place where I try to clarify this is toward the beginning of my essay 'Critically Queer', in *Bodies that Matter*, I begin with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects. But then, when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. ... what I'm trying to do is think about the performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names. Then I take a further step, through the Derridean rewriting of Austin, and suggest that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. ...

[...] [Butler is then asked about the way in which she apparently ignores biological constraints on bodies, most obviously the fact that male bodies can't produce children whilst female bodies can]. Yes, there will be that exasperated response [to what I do there], but there is a good tactical reason to reproduce it. Take your example of impregnation. Somebody might well say: isn't it the case that certain bodies go to the gynaecologist for certain kinds of examination and certain bodies do not? And I would obviously affirm that. But the real question here is: to what extent does a body get defined by its capacity for pregnancy? Why is it pregnancy by which that body gets defined? One might say it's because somebody is of a given sex that they go to the gynaecologist to get an examination that establishes the possibility of pregnancy, or one might say that going to the gynaecologist is the very production of "sex" — but it is still the question of pregnancy that is centring that whole institutional practice here.

Now, it seems to me that, although women's bodies generally speaking are understood as capable of impregnation, the fact of the matter is that there are female infants and children who cannot be impregnated, there are older women who cannot be impregnated, there are women of all ages who cannot be impregnated, and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women. What the question does is try to make the problematic of reproduction central to the sexing of the body. But I am not sure that is, or ought to be, what is absolutely salient or primary in the sexing of the body. If it is, I think it's the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints.

I do not deny certain kinds of biological differences. But I always ask under what conditions, under what discursive and institutional conditions, do certain biological differences — and they're not necessary ones, given the anomalous state of bodies in the world — become the salient characteristics of sex. In that sense I'm still in sympathy with the critique of "sex" as a political category offered by Monique Wittig. I still very much believe in the critique of the category of sex and the ways in which it's been constrained by a tacit institution of compulsory reproduction.

It's a practical problem. If you are in your late twenties or your early thirties and you can't get pregnant for biological reasons, or maybe you don't want to, for social reasons — whatever it is — you are struggling with a norm that is regulating your sex. It takes a pretty vigorous (and politically informed) community around you to alleviate the possible sense of failure, or loss, or impoverishment, or inadequacy — a collective struggle to rethink a dominant norm.

Why shouldn't it be that a woman who wants to have some part in child-rearing, but doesn't want to have a part in child-bearing, or who wants to have nothing to do with either, can inhabit her gender without an implicit sense of failure or inadequacy? When people ask the question

"Aren't these biological differences?", they're not really asking a question about the materiality of the body. They're actually asking whether or not the social institution of reproduction is the most salient one for thinking about gender. In that sense, there is a discursive enforcement of a norm.

... It's not just the norm of heterosexuality that is tenuous. It's all sexual norms. I think that every sexual position is fundamentally comic. If you say "I can only desire X", what you've immediately done, in rendering desire exclusively, is created a whole set of positions which are unthinkable from the standpoint of your identity. Now, I take it that one of the essential aspects of comedy emerges when you end up actually occupying a position that you have just announced to be unthinkable. That is funny. There's a terrible self-subversion in it.

When they were debating gays in the military on television in the United States a senator got up and laughed, and he said, "I must say, I know very little about homosexuality. I think I know less about homosexuality than about anything else in the world." And it was a big announcement of his ignorance of homosexuality. Then he immediately launched into a homophobic diatribe which suggested that he thinks that homosexuals only have sex in public bathrooms, that they are all skinny, that they're all male, etc, etc. So what he actually has is a very aggressive and fairly obsessive relationship to the homosexuality that of course he knows nothing about. At that moment you realise that this person who claims to have nothing to do with homosexuality is in fact utterly preoccupied by it.

I do not think that these exclusions are indifferent. Some would disagree with me on this and say: "Look, some people are just indifferent. A heterosexual can have an indifferent relationship to homosexuality. It doesn't really matter what other people do. I haven't thought about it much, it neither turns me on nor turns me off. I'm just sexually neutral in that regard." I don't believe that. I think that crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening it is in some way. I don't know if that's a Foucauldian point. It's probably a psychoanalytical point, but that's not finally important to me.

RP: Would it apply to homosexuals' relationship to heterosexuality?

Butler: Yes, absolutely.

RP: Although presumably not in the same way...

Butler: Yes, there's a different problem here, and it's a tricky one. When the woman in the audience at my talk said "I survived lesbian feminism and still desire women", I thought that was a really great line, because one of the problems has been the normative requirement that has emerged within some lesbian-feminist communities to come up with a radically specific lesbian sexuality. (Of course, not all lesbian feminism said this, but a strain of it did.)

... Lesbians make themselves into a more frail political community by insisting on the radical irreducibility of their desire. I don't think any of us have irreducibly distinct desires.

... There's a very specific notion of gender involved in compulsory heterosexuality: a certain view of gender coherence whereby what a person feels, how a person acts, and how a person expresses herself sexually is the articulation and consummation of a gender. It's a particular causality and identity that gets established as gender coherence which is linked to compulsory heterosexuality. It's not any gender, or all gender, it's that specific kind of coherent gender...

One of the problems with homosexuality is that it does represent psychosis to some people. Many people feel that who they are as egos in the world, whatever imaginary cen-

tres they have, would be radically dissolved were they to engage in homosexual relations. They would rather die than engage in homosexual relations. For these people homosexuality represents the prospect of the psychotic dissolution of the subject. How are we to distinguish that phobic abjection of homosexuality from what Žižek calls the real — where the real is that which stands outside the symbolic pact and which threatens the subject within the symbolic pact with psychosis?...

RP: Perhaps we could move on to the politics of queer theory, and in particular to the ideas of subversive repetition and transgressive reinscription, which we touched on earlier when we asked you about drag. Alan Sinfield has suggested that the problem with supposedly subversive representations of gender is that they're always recuperable. The dominant can always find a way of dismissing them and reaffirming itself. On the other hand, Jonathan Dollimore has argued that they're not always recuperable, but that any queer reading or subversive performance, any challenge to dominant representations of gender, can only be sustained as such collectively. It's only within critical subcultures that transgressive reinscriptions are going to make a difference. How do you respond to these views on the limits of a queer politics of representation?

Butler: I think that Sinfield is right to say that any attempt at subversion is potentially recuperable. There is no way to safeguard against that. You can't plan or calculate subversion. In fact, I would say that subversion is precisely an incalculable effect. That's what makes it subversive. As for the question of how a certain challenge becomes legible, and whether a rendering requires a certain collectivity, that seems right too. But I also think that subversive practices have to overwhelm the capacity to read, challenge conventions of reading, and demand new possibilities of reading.

For instance, when Act Up (the lesbian and gay activist group) first started performing Die-ins on the streets of New York, it was extremely dramatic. There had been street theatre, a tradition of demonstrations, and the tradition from the civil disobedience side of the civil rights movement of going limp and making policemen take you away: playing dead. Those precedents or conventions were taken up in the Die-in, where people "die" all at once. They went down on the street, all at once, and white lines were drawn around the bodies, as if they were police lines, marking the place of the dead. It was a shocking symbolisation. It was legible insofar as it was drawing on conventions that had been produced within previous protest cultures, but it was a renovation. It was a new adumbration of a certain kind of civil disobedience. And it was extremely graphic. It made people stop and have to read what was happening.

There was confusion. People didn't know at first, why these people were playing dead. Were they actually dying, were they actually people with AIDS? Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. Maybe they were HIV positive, maybe they weren't. There were no ready answers to those questions. The act posed a set of questions without giving you the tools to read off the answers. What I worry about are those acts that are more immediately legible. Those are the ones that I think are most readily recuperable. But the ones that challenge our practices of reading, that make us uncertain about how to read, or make us think that we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs, these seem really important to me.

...Some people would say that we need a ground from which to act. We need a shared collective ground for collective action. I think we need to pursue the moments of de-grounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms.

RP: What are the relations of this kind of symbolic politics to more traditional kinds of political practice? Presumably, its function is in some way tied to the role of mass media in the political systems of advanced capitalist societies, where representations play a role they don't necessarily have elsewhere.

Butler: Yes, I agree.

RP: Yet at the same time, it is a crucial part of this role that the domain of representation often remains completely cut off from effective political action. One might argue that the reason a politics of representation is so recuperable is precisely because it remains within the domain of representation - that it is only an adjunct to the business of transforming the relationship of society to the state, establishing new institutions, or changing the law. How would you respond to that?

Butler: First of all, I oppose the notion that the media is monolithic. It's neither monolithic nor does it act only and always to domesticate. Sometimes it ends up producing images that it has no control over. This kind of unpredictable effect can emerge right out of the centre of a conservative media without an awareness that it is happening. There are ways of exploiting the dominant media. The politics of aesthetic representation has an extremely important place. But it is not the same as struggling to change the law, or developing strong links with political officials, or amassing major lobbies, or the kinds of things needed by the grassroots movement to overturn anti-sodomy restrictions, for example.

I used to be part of a guerrilla theatre group called LIPS - it stood for nothing, which I loved - and now I'm contemplating joining the board of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. There is nothing to stop me from doing one rather than the other. For me, it does not have to be a choice. Other people are particularly adept working in the health care fields, doing AIDS activism - which includes sitting on the boards of major chemical corporations - doing lobbying work, phoning, or being on the street. The Foucauldian in me says there is no one site from which to struggle effectively. There have to be many, and they don't need to be reconciled with one another....

RP: We'd like to end by asking you how you see the future of feminism.

Butler: Catharine MacKinnon has become so powerful as the public spokesperson for feminism, internationally, that I think that feminism is going to have to start producing some powerful alternatives to what she's saying and doing - ones that can acknowledge her intellectual strength and not demonise her, because I do think there's an anti-feminist animus against her, which one should be careful not to encourage. Certainly, the paradigm of victimisation, the over-emphasis on pornography, the cultural insensitivity and the universalisation of "rights" - all of that has to be countered by strong feminist positions.

What's needed is a dynamic and more diffuse conception of power, one which is committed to the difficulty of cultural translation as well as the need to rearticulate "universality" in non-imperialist directions. This is difficult work and it's no longer viable to seek recourse to simple and paralysing models of structural oppression. But even her, in opposing a dominant conception of power in feminism, I am still "in" or "of" feminism. And it's this paradox that has to be worked, for there can be no pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure.

F. Third Wave: go global or stay local?

The following readings are an introduction to the concerns of Third Wave feminism. The first reading, an extract from a longer essay by Winnie Woodhull, outlines the political context for the Third Wave, especially in America. Despite possibilities for the broadening of intellectual horizons which globalisation opens up Woodhull sees a decline of internationalism. She describes how, under the radar of most feminists in the west, women are organising in Africa.

The second reading describes how the concept of “intersectionality” developed in the work of a very influential black American feminist Patricia Hill Collins. This idea has been taken up by both academic and activist feminism.

Global Feminisms, transnational political economies, Third World cultural production by Winnie Woodhull

If anything can be said with certainty about third wave feminism, it is that it is mainly a first world phenomenon generated by women who, like their second wave counterparts, have limited interest in women’s struggles elsewhere on the planet... a perusal of third wave feminist websites yields only one site centered on the fight for social justice (Third Wave Foundation), and even that one unself-consciously focuses exclusively on events in New York City and on women’s efforts in that town to combat inequalities stemming from “age, gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status” and so on.

... Not surprisingly, a number of third wave feminist websites promote women’s empowerment in and through computer technologies... Symptomatically, however, most of these sites either unabashedly promote capitalist self-advancement in the name of feminism, or else mistakenly assume that their sincere appeal to feminist action, self-help, and solidarity really addresses a worldwide audience.

I point this out in order to suggest that in much of the cyberfeminist world, as in much third wave and second wave feminism generally, the first world, perhaps unwittingly, stands in for the world as a whole.

... This aspect of western feminism is quite troubling, particularly since it is not limited to liberal organisations such as DigitalEve or to the work of liberal academic feminists.

Unfortunately, even “radical” feminists often turn a blind eye to the situation of women in the third world, or content themselves with paying lip service to the importance of third world feminist struggles without bothering to investigate the ways in which those struggles are linked with their own.

Of course, there are important exceptions... But whereas certain modes of radical feminist activism of the second wave had their roots in the US Civil Rights movement as well as in third world liberation movements, to which they considered their own struggles to be inextricably tied ... the acute consciousness of these links has faded in the minds of many of today’s feminists, regardless of the “wave” to which they supposedly belong.

Paradoxically, this is so despite the fact that today’s computer technologies and mass communications networks have facilitated the growth of transnational intergovernmental and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) devoted to feminism, human rights, and ecology, and have augmented the effectiveness of these organizations in putting direct democracy into practice, gaining the attention of the mainstream media, mobilizing and shaping public opinion, and putting pressure on governments to implement and enforce democratic policies that protect women’s interests....

Even though transnational feminisms have more potential today than ever before, they have been sidelined since the recession of the mid-1980s... third wave feminism emerged at a historical juncture in the late 1980s and early 1990s when leftist movements in western countries were more focused on their domestic economic and political crises than on international politics, and when the then-new CNN (Cable News Network) broadcast US President George Bush’s triumphant announcement of the inauguration of a New World Order — violently imposed without significant negotiation and without apology by the US — in the course of the Gulf War, the most mass-mediated international conflict in history.

Owing to the deindustrialization of the 1980s, this period was characterized by corporate downsizing, underemployment, and high unemployment, especially in Europe, as well as by the growing ethnicization of class differences, and by intense racial strife and xenophobia in the west — not to mention the feminization of poverty across the globe. It was also the time when information technology and transnational finance became the most powerful economic forces in the postindustrial western countries, enabling those nations to dominate the rest of the world more effectively than ever before.

Questions for discussion

- Do all activist feminists in your experience (i.e. in the UK) also (at best) pay lip service to the struggles of women internationally? What would it mean to do more than pay lip service?
- What do you make of Woodhull’s description of “global citizenship” and human rights which by implication she endorses here?
- What do you make the work of African NGOs which Woodhull herself describes as being limited in their effects. Are there any other kinds of political methods available in Africa? Or is to think in those terms a western imposition?
- In what ways does Collins’ description of how consciousness is shaped differ from the Marxist notion of class consciousness. Are you convinced by these ideas?
- What do you make of Collins’ view on how social change happens?

Finally, we must not forget the economic boom of the late 1990s, the moment at which the gap between rich and poor within the global North, as well as between the North and the South, reached unprecedented proportions, and when twenty-something investment bankers and dot.com whizzes were paying cash for top-of-the-line BMWs and million-dollar homes in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Given the historical context of their emergence, then, neither women's empowerment in and through information technology, nor feminist cultural/imaginative/erotic activity in cyberspace, nor third wave feminism generally can be adequately understood solely in terms of a western politics of gender and sexuality, since the latter cannot be divorced from matters of global political economy.

Even less can third wave feminism be understood simply in terms of a generational divide between second and third wavers, that is, in terms of oedipal battle between older and younger first world women, mainly white and middle class.

Its significance and potential can be grasped only by adopting a global interpretive frame, that is, by relinquishing the old frameworks of the west and developing new ones that take seriously the struggles of women the world over, a process that gained wide recognition among intellectuals in the 1980s thanks to the research of scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, whose groundbreaking essay *Under Western Eyes* played a key role in inaugurating feminist postcolonial studies.

Globalization, both as a social process and as a key concept in social science and humanities research, emerges as a central concern in the 1990s when the world-binding technologies of satellite communications and the internet begin to alter the cultural-political landscape, as did (and do) decentralizing, potentially democratizing technologies such as video and VCRs, fax machines, alternative radio, and cable television. Globalization also involves unprecedented transnational flows of capital and labor that fundamentally shape economic, political, social, and cultural relations.

Given the global arena in which third wave feminism emerges, it is disappointing that new feminist debates arising in first world contexts mainly address issues that pertain only to women in those contexts. At their best, they attend to issues of race and class as they shape the politics of gender and sexuality in the global North — hence the myriad community groups, websites, zines, and scholarly publications devoted to economic inequality and the gender struggles of minority women in North America and Europe.

They also explore the new sexualities, pleasures, and forms of embodiment that are coming into being through human interaction via the new media (Gillis). At their worst, third wavers proffer glib commentaries (or "rants") on the concerns and desires of young women in the West, as if no other women existed (or mattered).

...For more than a decade, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have been investigating the globalization process with the purpose of determining the extent to which it fosters the development of a transnational public sphere and global forms of citizenship. A transnational public sphere is considered to be important because it is rooted in civil society, that is, a social space that is controlled neither by the market nor by national governments, and that promotes "a sense of involvement with the affairs of other, unknown, nonkin citizens" (Sreberny-Mohammadi 19).

As flows of capital and labor alter national and ethnic landscapes worldwide, and as global media networks facilitate new forms of rapid communication, it becomes conceivable that a transnational public sphere could be expanded to include parts of the Third World (and for that matter the first world) that have so far been excluded, resulting in new freedoms for many people. Of course, fundamental questions remain regarding the possibility that

the mere existence of electronic linkages could guarantee meaningful political participation for

ordinary citizens, and that new public "spaces" would work to the benefit of women, ethnic and religious minorities, and others who have traditionally been excluded from effective involvement in the public sphere: "[i]n situations in which there is (as yet?) no civil society, can transnational news media, exile publishing, and the internet really help in the creation of such a space?" (Sreberny-Mohammadi 10). Moreover, we must ask, what are the political structures and shared symbolic forms that could sustain it (Sreberny-Mohammadi 19)?

...The counterpart of a transnational public sphere is global citizenship, which involves both deepening democracy and expanding it on a global scale, so that "issues such as peace, development, the environment, and human rights assume a global character" (Sreberny-Mohammadi 11). Indispensable elements in global citizenship include inter-governmental politics (as in the UN), international solidarity movements, independent media, and grassroots democracy. I would add that cultural expression is crucial as well since it alone encourages sensuous and affective investment in social arrangements, both real and imagined. As such, it has greater power to generate progressive change and sustain egalitarian relationships than do rational calculations of shared interest. ..

Women's Rights and Human Rights

How is the transnational concept of human rights being defended by African nongovernmental organizations in the cosmopolitan public sphere? How do these efforts affect African women?

... [one example] of an NGO defending human rights as a transnational concept is Women in Nigeria (WIN). WIN's activities are discussed by Imam, a Nigeria-based sociologist who is involved in an international research project on women under Muslim law, while also working with WIN. The WIN collective is a grassroots African feminist organization, one that sees women's liberation as inextricably linked to the liberation of poor urban workers and peasants in Nigeria, and that aims to "merge the concern for gender equality into popular democratic struggles" (Imam 292). WIN works actively, through direct democracy in its own activities and through "conscientization" to overcome hierarchies and conflicts not only of gender and class but also of language, region, ethnicity, and religion in its promotion of all Nigerian women's interests. WIN necessarily focuses much of its effort on dealing with the socioeconomic fallout of IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment policies (SAPs) imposed in Nigeria as well as in much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa since the late 1970s. These policies, which are intended to stabilize economies in order to make them attractive to lenders and foreign investors, require governments of poor nations to ensure that their people produce mainly for export, which often has the effect of requiring that most consumer goods be imported and purchased at inflated prices. Moreover, in the name of an "open economy" price controls and protective tariffs are abolished, with the result that local businesses are forced to fight a losing battle against multinational giants. Finally, in order to direct all possible elements in a nation's economy toward servicing the debt, the SAPs also impose radical reductions in public spending, which may cover everything from roads and transportation that do not directly serve foreign investors, to civil service jobs and pensions, as well as education, health, and other social services.

[these policies] disproportionately affect women and children. There have been marked decreases in the number of girls attending school at all levels, marked increases in infant mortality, and alarming increases in the numbers of people infected with HIV and AIDS. If we are to believe

the analyses that were put forward at the recent Barcelona conference on AIDS, this massive healthcare issue alone will, before long, take a huge toll not only in terms of large scale human suffering but in terms of economic productivity and political stability as well. For feminist groups like WIN, a key concern in all of this is the dramatic increase in rape and domestic violence that has resulted from the combination of rising economic hardship, declining opportunities for meaningful political action, a burgeoning of misogynist fundamentalisms of all kinds, and the fact that in many African cultures, woman-beating is seen as the right of husbands and male relatives...

The situation in Nigeria — terrible effects of the SAPs, the repressive government, the official and unofficial violence against women — exists, in various forms, all over sub-Saharan Africa. And while democratic and feminist NGOs are doing invaluable work in the defense of human rights in both national and international arenas, I am a bit skeptical, not so much about the liberatory potential of the cosmopolitan public sphere and grassroots democratic politics in Africa, as about their liberatory effectiveness. As Imam points out, already in the mid-1990s, the SAPs had taken such a toll that it was almost impossible for WIN to raise funds for its operations by selling books and T-shirts, as it had done in the past, as a means of resisting state control and state appropriation. It could no longer even rely on donated meeting space, because the economic crisis was so acute.

In order to support its “projects, campaigns, research, meetings, and publishing activities” (Imam 305), it was increasingly relying on grants from external sources. And

while its policy in the mid-1990s was to accept outside funding only for projects that WIN had designed independently, it is hard to imagine that the organization has been able to remain as autonomous as it once was.

If WIN cannot afford typing and printing services or meeting spaces, to what extent can its members really benefit immediately and substantially from satellite communications and the internet? To what extent can they meaningfully participate in the new cosmopolitan public sphere?

WIN has reportedly had some success in using popular theater for consciousness-raising, but could it also make use of mass-circulated popular cultural forms such as romance novels, as writers and publishers are doing in Nigeria and Ivory Coast (Adejunmobi)? Could it adjust the romance formulas to appeal to particular ethnic or national audiences, drawing on local traditions that provide a point of entry for raising questions about the gender politics of intimate relationships, work, and cosmopolitan modes of identification? Could it do so in a critical way that does more than to market print commodities profitably? These are real questions, not just for Africans or Africanists, but for everyone, if indeed we live in a globalized world. The larger issue is that reflections on the emancipatory possibilities of new media and the new cosmopolitan public sphere need to incorporate a serious consideration of the parts of the world that are not wealthy, that is, most of the world. This issue is especially acute for Third Wave feminism, since the latter is defined, to a considerable extent, by the historical moment of its emergence, a moment of unprecedented interrelation between the local and the global, between the West and “the rest.”

Intersectionality and Matrices of Domination

Collins is best known for her ideas of intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Intersectionality is a particular way of understanding social location in terms of crisscross systems of oppression. Specifically, intersectionality is an “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender,

sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organisation, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women”.

This idea goes back to Max Weber and Georg Simmel, two theorists working in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Weber’s concern was to understand the complications that status and power brought to Marx’s idea of class stratification.

According to Weber, class consciousness and social change are more difficult to achieve than Marx first thought: status group affiliation and differences in power create concerns that may override class issues. For example, race may be more important than class for two racially distinct families living below the poverty. In such cases, social change becomes less likely.

Simmel was concerned with how modern living in cities created different kinds of friendship patterns. In smaller, more rural settings, Simmel claimed that people generally had what he termed “organic” social relationships. These relations are organic because very little if any choice was involved: many of the social groups in smaller, more stable settings overlap one with another and thus strongly influence group membership. For example, in traditional rural settings an individual would generally go to the same school as her or his family members. Chances are good that work groups would overlap with other groups as well, with one’s boss and fellow employees attending the same church.

Such overlapping and “natural” group affiliations produced a good deal of social homogeneity. In modern, urban settings, the “rational” group membership pattern prevails. Here individuals choose their group affiliations apart from pre-existing memberships such as family. Additionally, social groups in large cities tend not to overlap and influence one another.

Simmel’s concern in outlining these two types of group membership patterns is to see how these differing patterns affect the person.

Generally speaking, under conditions of rational group membership, people will tend to see themselves as unique individuals with greater freedom of choice. However, in Simmel’s scheme, this freedom and individuality is offset by increasing levels of anomie and the blasé attitude.

There is a way in which Collins blends these two approaches while at the same time going beyond them. Like Simmel, Collins is concerned with the influences of intersectionality on the individual. But the important issue for Collins is the way intersectionality creates different kinds of lived experiences and social realities. She is particularly concerned with how these interact with what passes as objective knowledge and with how diverse voices of intersectionality are denied under scientism. Like Weber, she is concerned about how intersectionality creates different kinds of inequalities and how these cross-cutting influences affect social change. But Collins brings Weber’s notion of power into this analysis in a much more sophisticated way. Collins sees intersectionality working within a matrix of domination.

The matrix of domination refers to the overall organization of power in a society. There are two features to any matrix.

First, any specific matrix has a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression. Just what and how these systems come together is historically and socially specific.

Second, intersecting systems of oppression are specifically organized through four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The structural domain consists of social structures such as law, polity, religion, and the economy. This domain sets the structural parameters that organize power relations. For ex-

ample, prior to February 3, 1870 blacks in the United States could not legally vote. Although constitutionally enabled to vote, voting didn't become a reality for many African American people until almost a century later with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which officially ended Jim Crow law. Collins' point is that the structural domain sets the overall organization of power within a matrix of domination and that the structural domain is slow to change, often only yielding to large-scale social movements, such as the Civil War and the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. The disciplinary domain manages oppression.

Collins borrows this idea from both Weber and Michel Foucault: the disciplinary domain consists of bureaucratic organizations whose task it is to control and organize human behavior through routinization, rationalization, and surveillance. Here the matrix of domination is expressed through organizational protocol that hides the effects of racism and sexism under the canopy of efficiency, rationality, and equal treatment.

If we think about the contours of black feminist thought that Collins gives us, we can see that the American university system and the methods of financing research are good examples. Sexism and racism never raise their ugly heads when certain kinds of knowledge are systematically excluded in the name of science and objectivity.

This same kind of pattern is seen in the US economy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005), in the first quarter of 2005 the average weekly income for white men was \$731.00, for white women \$601.00, for black men \$579.00, and for black women the average weekly wage was \$506.00. In a country that has outlawed discrimination based on race and sex, black women still make on average about 31% less than a white man.

In this domain, change can come through insider resistance. Collins uses the analogy of an egg. From a distance, the surface of the egg looks smooth and seamless.

But upon closer inspection, the egg is revealed to be riddled with cracks. For those interested in social justice, working in a bureaucracy is like working the cracks, finding spaces and fissures to work and expand. Again, change is slow and incremental.

The hegemonic domain legitimates oppression. Max Weber was among the first to teach us that authority functions because people believe in it. This is the cultural sphere of influence where ideology and consciousness come together. The hegemonic domain links the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains. It is made up of the language we use, the images we respond to, the values we hold, and the ideas we entertain.

And it is produced through school curricula and textbooks, religious teachings, mass media images and contexts, community cultures, and family histories. The black feminist priority of self-definition and critical, reflexive education are important stepping stones to deconstructing and dissuading the hegemonic domain. As Collins (2000) puts it, "Racist and sexist ideologies, if they are disbelieved, lose their impact".

The interpersonal domain influences everyday life. It is made up of the personal relationships we maintain as well as the different interactions that make up our daily life. Collins points out that change in this domain begins with the intrapersonal; that is, how an individual sees and understands her or his own self and experiences. In particular, people don't generally have a problem identifying ways in which they have been victimized. But the first step in changing the interpersonal domain of the matrix of domination is seeing how our own "thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination".

Part of this first step is seeing that people have a tendency to identify with an oppression, most likely the one they

have experienced, and to consider all other oppressions as being of less importance. In the person's mind their oppression has a tendency then to become a master status. This leads to a kind contradiction where the oppressed becomes the oppressor. For example, a black heterosexual woman may discriminate against lesbians without a second thought; or, a black Southern Baptist woman may believe that every school classroom ought to display the Ten Commandments. "Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors".

G. Sex work

One of the biggest feminist controversies of the last decade has been between those who advocate self-organisation and unionisation of women and men who work in the sex industry and those who advocate bans and restrictions on e.g. lap dancing or pornography. The following reading outlines the political framework for those who advocate self-organisation.

There are *indirect* links between these politics and the “sex positive” feminism that emerged in the 1990s.

Sex positive feminism had its roots in the “Sex Wars” of the 1980s and opposition to anti-pornography campaigning in the 1980s. Asserts that fact that sex is natural, that women have as much or more to gain by sexual liberation as men as long as women have control over the processes of defining sexuality. Sex positive feminists today actually have a wide range of views on sex work but are at least for decriminalisation and at may argue that sex work is not necessarily “bad” for women. Other issues and alliances come within the sex positive issues of concern: BDSM and solidarity with transgender people.

A socialist feminist analysis of sex work by Ava Caradonna (Ava Caradonna is a collective identity used by sex worker activists and allies. Ava is an attempt to find positive tools to combat whore stigma and to find radical and material ways to represent the collective organisation of people who work in the sex industry.)

Sex work is selling sex (or sexual acts) for money. There is nothing inherently exploitative or degrading about consensual sexual behaviour regardless of its motivation. Yet many campaigners and lawmakers ignore the voices of sex workers and refuse to recognise that the vast majority work in the industry by choice. The stigma associated with selling sex structures the meaning and context of commercial sexual practices in fundamental ways.

The anti-prostitution lobby define sex work as violence against women, campaign for the abolition of prostitution and for the criminalisation of clients. Invisible in the mainstream prostitution discourse are the men who sell sex — to other men and to women — and the women who are also clients. The focus remains primarily on prostitution — making invisible the thousands of men, women and trans people who sell sex on the phone, via the Internet, dance in clubs or make films. Perhaps most dangerously, campaigners against sex workers’ rights present sex as something men do to women and enshrine women’s status as victims.

In contrast, support for the decriminalisation of sex work and the repeal of all laws related to the exchange of sex for money is premised on the idea that sexual behaviour between consenting adults requires no regulation by the state. Decriminalisation would mean that sex workers would be entitled to the full protection of the law.

Fundamentally, everyone should have equal freedom to choose how they earn their living and freedom to choose what they do with their own body. In a neo-liberal capitalist society, how “free” we are to choose to work can be debated, but this is true of all occupations, not just the sex industry. The struggle for sex worker rights must begin with sex work being recognised as labour and at the very least that those who work in the sex industry being entitled to the same labour rights as other workers and the same human rights as other people.

Shifting the analysis of sex work to labour relations and migration provides analytical tools to investigate the gendered nature of labour (not only in sex, but also domestic and care work), the role of border and immigration controls in maintaining and heightening exploitation, as well as how these inequalities are negotiated, challenged and resisted. A labour analysis of sex work removes commercial sexual services from moralistic and paternalistic arguments that view sex as a fixed, privileged or natural site of human activity and places such activity within the realm of commodified labour relations.

...Labour is both a practice in which gender and sexuality play important structuring roles and one that cannot simply be reduced to gender or sexuality. The same argument holds for commercial sexual services: gender and sexuality play important structuring roles yet are not the totality of the relation. In analysing commercial sex and the structuring role of gender and sexuality it is crucial to move beyond the neo-abolitionist approaches to prostitution that view all sex workers as always-already women and to broaden the framework of analysis so as to incorporate the experiences of the thousands of men and transsexuals who work in the sex industry in Europe and the increasing number of women who purchase commercial sexual services.

Borrowing from aspects of Marxism’s theorisation of the commodity-form and theories of labour relations, like the majority of commercial exchanges under capitalism, prostitution involves the sale and purchase of a commodity. The idea that a prostitute “sells her body” is inaccurate, for at the end of the exchange the client does not “own” the prostitute’s body. Rather, what the client purchases is a sexual service, i.e. an act or a temporary affective relation that the sex worker performs.

Using the Marxist definition of labour power, the physical and mental activities involved in producing sexual services constitute labour power. The definition of sexual labour as affective labour allows for a more complicated and useful understanding of the labour processes involved in producing sexual services. As well as involving sexual acts, analysis of sexual labour needs to include activities and capabilities such as satisfying people’s needs to be liked and sexually desired, to be entertained, for companionship and communication. To reduce the work of sex workers crudely to that of penetrative sexual acts oversimplifies and masks the actual labour involved in the production of sex as a commodity.

Questions for discussion

- Can all sex work be “fitted in” to the labour analysis advocated here?
- What do you personally feel you know about sex work? What do you think has shaped your views about sex work? (Participants might like to think about what their answers say about the position of sex work in society)
- In your view what role should the state/law have in “regulating” sex work?

By situating sexual labour within the framework of affective labour (performed by both illegal and legal workers) alongside other forms of affective labour (domestic work or caring service work) in this way, the production, consumption and exchange of sexual services can be understood within an industry and labour market context. The categorisation of commercial sex as affective labour enables an analysis of sex work that highlights the gendered radicalised labour market options available to women in general and migrant women in particular.

For migrant women arriving in Europe with the intention of working, the jobs available to them are overwhelmingly limited to three basic types of “service” work: domestic work, caring for people in their homes and providing sexual experiences in a wide range of venues in the sex industry. In the sex industry, migrants are now considered to be the majority of those selling sex in Europe. The reality of large increases in the number of migrants selling sex in societies in the “global North” can be understood as one of the factors in the proliferation of trafficking campaigns and policies aimed specifically at migrants and sex work.

It is also necessary to investigate the intersection of labour and criminalisation that exists in trafficking and prostitution policies. Criminalisation operates in two ways: through immigration policies that criminalise the self-willed migration of people moving without official permission and policies that criminalise commercial sexual practices. Understanding the productive role of regulation and criminalisation is crucial in developing both an understanding of commercial sex and also current policies and campaigns to combat trafficking.

“Criminalisation does not simply ‘repress’ a pre-existing thing called ‘prostitution’, nor is it irrelevant to a practice instead wholly determined by underlying features of male sexuality and/or capitalism. Instead, it aids in the production of a particular mode of sex work. Critics who overlook this productive role are at risk of getting their analysis precisely backwards. Concluding from current characteristics of prostitution that it is a bad thing, they may conclude that efforts should be made to deter and eliminate it. But if existing efforts to deter or eliminate sex work are themselves the causes of its oppressive characteristics, then the appropriate response might be to eliminate those efforts, not commercial sex.” (Zatz, 1997: 302)

A similar argument to that of criminalisation of commercial sex can be made in relation to migration, in that the criminalisation of people moving without official permission can be understood not as a practice to stop or repress such border crossings but instead as an aid in the production of a particular mode of migration. Far from the stated aim of stopping “illegal migration”, it in fact guarantees the existence of illegal migrants, people who through the production of their illegality have limited labour options available and recourse to remedies against exploitative labour practices.

In early 2006 several activists based in London, involved in sex worker rights activism, began to conceptualise and organise around the x:talk project — a project that seeks to explore and expand the ideas and confidence developed in criticising the mainstream human trafficking discourse, drawing on insights gained from sex workers’, migrant and feminist struggles. On a practical level, the project involves providing free English language classes for migrant sex workers with particular attention and focus on the language skills required to sell sex for money.

Language and communication are crucial elements to directly challenge and change conditions of work and life, and to come to together and to organise. Communication is central to change. Language is a basic individual and collective power that improves both possibilities to work and possibilities of resistance. Central to the politics of x:talk, is

the autonomy of all people moving across borders and the dignity of every gender employing their resources in the sex industry. Central to this understanding of gender and migration is an understanding of sex work as labour. A feminist analysis and practice is crucial to changing the sex industry. Women represent the majority of workers in the industry and gendered sexualised and reproductive labour have historically constituted a central part in the structures that subordinate and oppress women. The people that have taken the main initiative of this organisation and project are women. Starting from the ground up, in a grass roots way, x:talk nevertheless aims to work with the whole industry. Issues of gender and transgender difference — at their intersections with racial and sexual issues must be addressed in order to include people from across the industry and from diverse gender backgrounds.

The racist and anti-feminist trafficking rhetoric of “protection” peddled by mainstream anti-trafficking campaigns, in which women are reduced to passive victims, under the control of organised crime or cruel men, produces and justifies the deportation of migrant sex workers and increases the criminalisation and exploitation of workers in the sex industry. It also creates divisions between migrants’ and sex workers’ forms of organisation and resistance.

The x:talk project has been an attempt to shift the praxis of the campaigns for sex worker rights by rethinking and reconfiguring what “labour organising” can and should be about and address in a material way the realities and needs of migrants working in the sex industry. The political project of labour organising in the sex industry appears as one which involves the organisation of “workers” and to also provide a collective voice for sex workers. The success of such projects rests on their ability to relate to the changing demographics within the industry and to the difficulties of organising within an illegalised and stigmatised workforce. To take seriously this task is to acknowledge that for the most part labour organising (and also radical political projects in general) involves representation and visibility. However many people working in the sex industry neither need nor desire to be visible.

In an industry that has thrived in an unregulated and marginalised manner, many people work precisely because they can be invisible. The x:talk project has attempted to address this with the belief that through access to resources, knowledge and skills, people can make decisions about their own lives and work. Far from the mainstream practice of “rescuing” or “helping” sex workers, the x:talk project is a conscious effort to make contact with migrant sex workers communities, offer a practical and needed service and ultimately attempt to build political alliances and strengthen migrant sex worker networks.

An Aboriginal activist in Australia, Lila Watson makes the point clearly: “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Part 2: Experiences in the labour movement, on the left

A. Our unions should challenge sexism

By an RMT member

Have you ever experienced sexism at work? Have you ever witnessed it? Sexism can be very prevalent in male-dominated industries and often goes unchallenged. But women should not have to go through it, and the unions should do something about it.

What is sexism?

Sexism is discriminatory and demeaning behaviour towards members of the opposite sex. In the vast majority of cases it is men behaving like this towards women.

Sexism reinforces the inferior and constricted position in society that women have occupied for centuries. When working-class women have to come up against this in their workplace and in society, it creates divisions between them and working-class men.

In the workplace, it takes many forms.

Some examples are:

Sexist jokes. Have you been asked to make the tea simply because you're the only woman in the room? It's not that most people think a woman's place is strictly in the home; these days, such jokes are "funny" because we all know a woman's role is more than housework. But sometimes it would be nice to make the tea without any reference to gender.

Sexually inappropriate comments. Some men, particularly if they are in a superior grade (which men often are), only relate to their female colleagues through flirting. Some think they have the right to make comments like "been keeping you up has he?" if you come into work looking dishevelled. Again, this can be funny up to a point, but why can't men and women just talk to each other like two human beings?

Not being respected in our jobs. Does it ever feel like you have to work so much harder to prove you can do your job than your male counterpart? Do you feel you get treated with less respect than male colleagues?

Bitching about women who need to have a flexible working arrangement or who have medical restrictions because of health problems or pregnancy. Employers often treat women in these situations really badly, and the last thing they need is workmates adding to the stress. If male workmates think it is acceptable for bosses to harass women who are pregnant, the same bosses will think it is okay to harass

all workers if they are e.g. sick.

When sexist remarks or "jokes" are made by someone who has power over you — your supervisor for instance — it becomes very difficult to challenge if you are not backed up by your union. You can't even "needle" them as a reply, make a disparaging joke about them, because the chances are their reaction is going to be to make your working life difficult. They are using the sexism to put you down.

All workers need to understand that sexism is an additional weapon that managers and bosses have in their power to use against all of us.

How do we respond?

Hopefully, in most workplaces now, a racist joke would be met with outrage. But sexism is seen as "just a bit of banter", which we laugh along with in case we get accused of "having no sense of humour".

Similarly, if women want to be talked to as an equal, rather than "flirted with", we get accusations of being prudish.

These accusations silence us from standing up to sexist attitudes. Women can often feel like they are treading a balance between "having a laugh" with colleagues and not taking unwanted comments. It shouldn't have to feel like that.

Some women are more affected by it than others. If we don't like it, we can feel there is "something wrong" with us. Comments about personal subjects e.g. our sexual behaviour, can be personally upsetting, and that makes it hard to stand up to

It is not easy for women affected by a sexist culture to have the confidence to stand up to it especially if we feel like we're on our own.

A recent motion to RMT conference offered a few ideas on how to challenge sexism at work. This might be adapted to fit other workplaces and industries.

- Carry out a survey of women's experiences. This will hopefully break down the feeling among women that they are the only ones suffering sexism.

- Run workshops on challenging sexism. Once we have found that we're not alone, hopefully we will feel confident to come forward with a collective voice against this. We can learn from each other.

- Run a national campaign. It will be easier for individuals to challenge sexism if there is a campaign from their national union behind them.

- Train union reps and members on the importance of standing up to sexism at work. Fighting sexism should not be a battle just for the women affected, who can often be a minority in a workplace. A better culture is one where every

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think sexism (as opposed to e.g. racism) is often treated as a joke?
- Can you think of any other kinds of workplace-related sexist behaviour?
- Can you/should you do something about women workers being indifferent to sexist behaviour?
- What are the main things (maybe drawing on your own experience) unions should do about sexist behaviour and sexist discrimination?

worker understands and takes up these issues. But even union reps can sometimes be guilty of sexist behaviour — or of letting it go unchallenged — sending out the wrong message in a workplace.

This is just about workers standing together to stamp out prejudice and ideas that divide us. It is sad that this doesn't already happen.

Our bosses can exploit these prejudices and divisions to weaken us and attack all our rights. We should fight those divisions.

"Sexism is not something we have to tolerate"

Interview with a female London Underground worker.

Women working on the Underground often have very different perspectives on sexism. What one woman sees as "banter" is seen as hurtful and insulting by another.

I was speaking to another woman worker (and union activist) recently and she told me she hadn't any problems with male colleagues. She said they called her a "bitch" and a "prostitute" all the time. When I said I thought this was horribly sexist, she said also called men very rude names. But the names she gets called are gendered, are derogatory towards women in general.

Either, because this sexist language hasn't been challenged in the past and women haven't formed a view that this is a problem, or women simply do not see it as a problem.

Either way, dealing with the issue should not fall back on an individual's level of toleration.

On the other hand the variation in an individual's level of toleration makes it harder to argue the need to do something about it.

Even when you are relatively clued up about issues like sexism it is easy to become "desensitised". It was only when I started talking to friends about things I had experienced at work, and they expressed their horror, that I began to get some perspective, and objectivity, and began to think "what we go through is mad".

If we begin to talk about the issues, then people may start to change their ideas and some behaviours associated with sexist ideas. The idea that workmates should talk to each other as equals will begin to permeate.

That process is important because it a matter of giving confidence to women. If they do have a problem with sexist remarks then it is not that there is something wrong with them for feeling uncomfortable or wanting to object. If we do not talk about these things, then we leave women isolated.

The exact same principle is necessary in relation racist and homophobic remarks.

It is much easier to challenge the sexism of workmates that are your equal, are in the same grade, than it is to challenge that of your supervisor — and most of the supervisors on the Underground are men!

"Laddishness" is an issue. During the summer women come through the station in short skirts and little tops and the men ogle. They can be serving a woman but also obviously looking down their top. I've seen male colleagues on the gate have their heads at an angle, as if they wanted to look up women passengers' skirts. I don't want to be working on the same job with male colleagues who are so blatantly ogling women in a really disrespectful way. It makes you wonder: if they think about women like this, what do they think about me?

When I tackled someone about the ogling he said. "It's just natural. Men can't help it." I said "I'm pleased that you acknowledge that this is a weakness." "Oh, no it's not a weakness. It's just natural". "Okay," I said, "It's natural for women too." Then he said "Oh no, if a woman is behaving like that, she must be very damaged." These are the backward attitudes you come across.

Of course it isn't wrong, in general, to look at people and

women do it too. And personally I find it surprising the way heterosexual men don't go for stereotypically "beautiful" female physical types. But even these preferences are expressed in sexist terms — "fat birds in tight clothes"!

Often men feel like they have to play along with unpleasant sexist "banter" of the "alpha males", the men who are most sexist. Even though some men don't like it and they don't really think like that about women, they can be cowards, going along with the everyday sexism. But you can challenge most men (men in your own grade anyway) about this kind of acceptance of sexism.

If there were more women supervisors and they challenged the sexism, the male supervisors might be forced to listen to them. But it's no good having just one or two women supervisors, as we do now. They get a lot of sexist shit too.

Having more women supervisors might also work against the general lack of respect women get for doing their job. On the whole, women are less likely to get promotion.

Perhaps women's lack of confidence stops them going for promotion. Men may more easily see themselves in a role that involves taking more responsibility. If you don't see many women doing different jobs, then you tend not to think "That's something I could do!"

Managing shift work and childcare responsibilities can be a bigger issue for women. One woman I know did get a promotion but she could not get the flexible hours she needed. Higher grades tend not to be offered as part-time work. Some grades have to do night work which is obviously awkward if you have childcare responsibilities, even shared ones.

With job cuts and new rosters coming in, it is going to be harder to accommodate flexible working.

It is going to be more important to get female reps and these reps will need to be fully backed up by the union. In a recent dispute I was accused (by people who didn't back the strike) of getting "too emotionally involved" because I tried to tackle the level of scabbing. That kind of criticism would not be made about a male rep.

B. Beyond the Fragments revisited

Readings: Polemic against Rowbotham from 1979 by Pat Longman. Beyond the Fragments by Sheila Rowbotham The problem of democracy and The Leninist sleight of hand (extracts but recommended to read whole text); Comments on Trotsky's New Course by Max Shachtman. B is for Bolshevism.

Polemic against Sheila Rowbotham by Pat Longman

A noticeable feature of the last few years has been the number of people who have rejected the Leninist conception of the party and looked for other forms of organisation. This rejection has been particularly prevalent within the women's movement where such ideas were able to gain acceptance partly because of the left's initial hostility to the movement.

The socialist-feminist current which appeared during the time of the Working Women's Charter Campaign laid down its aim as producing a synthesis of socialism and feminism. For some time the ideas of the socialist-feminist current remained vague; the book entitled *Beyond the Fragments*, and particularly the essay by Sheila Rowbotham, is to be welcomed, for in some ways it makes the task of coming to grips with the criticisms that many socialist-feminists (and others) have of the left easier.

Sheila Rowbotham's article is written from a viewpoint in which the class struggle is largely absent. Her polemic against Leninist forms of organisation takes the form of a struggle for libertarianism against authoritarian forms of organisation. Her rejection of the need for a revolutionary party flows from her dismissal of the need for a revolutionary theory and a rejection of scientific Marxism.

Although she sometimes sees the need for organisational structures, she consistently dismisses the political role of the party; and although she warns against extreme subjectivism, she nevertheless raises subjectivity to the highest level and sees it as the guiding force for political activity.

For Sheila, Leninism can't provide guidance for building an organisation because it excludes the experience of women's and the working class's struggle. It negates the politics of experience which the women's movement encapsulates. A necessary precondition for properly relating to the working class is, according to Sheila Rowbotham, an open and flexible approach to other people's subjective experiences.

Sheila Rowbotham's anti-Leninism and anti-Trotskyism

flow from her experience of left organisations. However, one of the problems of the essay is that the criticisms of Leninism and Trotskyism become difficult to disentangle from her criticisms of particular organisations. Therefore, the lack of democracy within the International Socialism Group (now SWP) is proof that Leninism is inherently undemocratic. Its turn to democratic centralism in the late 1960s is given as the reason for its inability to take up the question of women's oppression, not its underestimation of the political role of the party and its workerist attitudes. Sheila Rowbotham is unable to understand this because the importance of the political programme is the very thing she dismisses herself.

Sheila Rowbotham joined the International Socialism Group in the 1960s when it had a loose federalist structure. The reasons she cites for doing so are specifically its political openness and flexibility. Organisational and political flexibility is needed to respond quickly to the class struggle. However, sometimes it can be used as an excuse not for providing a lead to the class but for tail-ending it and capitulating to backward and chauvinist ideas. Sheila rejects the idea that democratic centralism can provide flexibility and the maximum unity in action, so that political theories can be tested in struggle. She does not see that the absence of such unity leads to inertia and a lack of political focus.

Such a disciplined and unified political approach can only be achieved, of course, by the maximum of accountability and democracy possible. Democracy is absolutely vital to a well-functioning political organisation. Without it political debate is stifled and political lessons remain undrawn.

Sheila replaces political theory by an almost religious and mystical belief about subjective experiences. Talking about the women's movement, she says:

"We have stressed for instance the closeness and protection of a small group and the feelings of sisterhood. Within the small group it has been important that every woman has space and air for her feelings and ideas to grow. The assumption is that there isn't a single correctness which can be learned off by heart and passed on by poking people with it. It is rather that we know our feelings and ideas move and transform themselves in relation to other women.

"We all need to express and contribute... Our views are valid because they come from within us and not because we hold a received correctness. The words we use seek an honesty about our own interest in what we say. This is the opposite to most left language which is constantly distinguishing itself as correct and then covering itself with a determined objectivity."

Sheila Rowbotham appears to believe that the less well thought-out ideas are and the more spontaneous the better.

Questions for discussion

- What are principles of democratic centralist forms of organising? Is it democratic?
- What safeguards can we have against Stalinisation?
- Sheila Rowbotham promotes "participatory democracy" as a healthy way of organising and also claims the women's liberation movement did not have an established hierarchy. Today consensual decision making is promoted as an alternative form of organising considered superior and more democratic than Leninist organisation. How would we assess the democratic merits of these forms of organising? Does an absence of formal leadership mean there is no leadership? If not how is it accountable?
- The left and labour movement in the 1970s was more male dominated than today and sexism, racism and homophobia were more of a problem. Rowbotham seems to argue that democratic centralism allows for those with greater power under capitalism (white males) to dominate in revolutionary organisations. That it is the nature of organisation that prevents oppressive relationships between different groups within "the party" from being challenged or overcome. If we accept that sexism etc was/ can be problematic within the left what answers do we have to this.
- Is there something intrinsic to democratic centralist organisation that denies individual experience and initiative?
- Is "Leninism" just about how we organise?

Difficulties are experienced by women because of our conditioning, particularly in analysing ideas and articulating our thoughts. However, the last thing we need is to glorify these difficulties and mystify them under the guise of sisterhood.

Sheila Rowbotham sees subjective experiences as being pure and honest. However, she never questions where this subjectivity comes from in reality; subjective attitudes can be extremely dangerous and reactionary.

Also, her emphasis on building pre-figurative forms of society in our everyday lives comes dangerously close to lifestyle politics and a concept that we don't have to fight for socialism — living it is good enough.

Sheila's search is not for revolutionary theory but for a moral standard for the left. Honesty and love are stressed above all else. What is meant by these terms is never defined.

Sheila Rowbotham's critique of the far left is not only that they are too politically intransigent and not open enough. She believes that Leninist forms of organisation no longer fit the British situation. In fact she reiterates the old right wing argument about "the seeds of Stalinism" being inherent in Bolshevism:

"But there is no need to stop here. It must also be admitted that the Bolsheviks, even before Stalin, have a lot to account for, and that Leninism destroyed vital aspects of socialism even in creating a new kind of left politics." She quotes approvingly E P Thompson's dictum "Leninism was a specific product of very special historical circumstances which seemed to be irrelevant to this country and at this time and which could often entail anti-democratic and anti-libertarian premises."

Sheila Rowbotham never defines what these special circumstances are or what is meant by democracy.

Her belief that the Leninist party is inherently undemocratic and unable to incorporate the ideas of the women's movement is given further weight by her criticisms of Marxists' inability to fully understand the nature of women's oppression.

"Under Marx and Engels' influence communists dismissed crucial questions about sexual oppression, control over fertility and the cultural subordination of women as a sex which other contemporaries in the socialist and feminist movement recognised. This is not to dismiss the inspired leaps made by Marx and Engels theoretically or to forget that Lenin was much more sympathetic than some Bolsheviks towards women's oppression. It is not to deny that Trotsky paid more attention to cultural aspects of subordination though he stopped short at sexuality. But they were not omniscient."

It is undoubtedly true that Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky didn't write the last words on women's oppression and that there were people who had a much deeper understanding of how female sexuality is repressed and who fought for gay rights. However, any attempt to weigh up the Bolsheviks' contribution to the fight for women's liberation has to be seen in a historical context.

They mobilised thousands of women workers to fight for their liberation, and achieved a revolution which did more for women's rights than anything previously. The wealth of material that survives from this period, particularly concerning the building of the mass communist women's movement in Russia, has been borrowed by many left organisations and by many feminists in helping them to work out a strategy for women's liberation.

Her critique of the Bolsheviks and the Leninist party leads her to demand an autonomous women's movement; she means more than the recognition of the need for women to organise separately. Her idea implies a struggle for women's rights which is separate and distinct from the struggle for workers' power. She criticises the linking of the

mass communist women's movement to the party:

"But the outcome of the debate around the organisational power of women's sections in Communist Parties had been partly preempted by the approach which had prevailed from the 1890s in the Second International towards the women's movement of the day. The oversimplified and sectarian dismissal of all autonomous forms of feminism with the insistence on the Social Democratic Parties as the only place for women's agitation isolated many socialist women from the more radical currents within feminism. This necessarily curtailed their capacity to question the Marxist theory of the 'woman question' or to challenge the hegemony of the male leaderships of the Social Democratic Parties. The tighter discipline of the Bolsheviks and the acceptance of democratic centralism cut off the possibility of appeal outside the parties. Under Stalin of course all forms of inner party democracy in the Soviet Union perished and with them the women's sections. This had international implications".

The mass communist women's movement was fighting to build a revolutionary movement of working class women; it was largely successful. Sheila seems to be suggesting that they should have been less concerned with this aim and more concerned with relating to sections of the radical feminist movement in Russia who undoubtedly hid their petit-bourgeois reformism under a veneer of radicalism.

Their hostility towards the Bolsheviks was not because their ideas on sexuality were a little limited, but because they were working class revolutionaries. Does Sheila Rowbotham's reference to the male leaderships of the Social Democratic Parties also mean that there is something called men's politics and women's politics and that male politics have a greater tendency to be suspect?

The German Social Democratic Party was reformist, but was it because Karl Kautsky was a man? Was it because Rosa Luxemburg was a woman that she was revolutionary?

Note also the jump from Bolshevism to Stalinism as if one was the logical extension of the other. Sheila Rowbotham does acknowledge elsewhere in her article the problems of isolation and backwardness that the Russian Revolution faced, but primarily she attributes the degeneration to the Bolsheviks' pernicious forms of organisation.

It is quite noticeable how much more sympathetic Sheila Rowbotham is towards the ideas expressed in Eurocommunism:

"Eurocommunism has opened up the issue of autonomy in a different context from the classical stress on the party in Leninism. Its supporters stress the need to make alliances rather than the vanguard role of the party. This expresses actual changes in practice of which the British Road to Socialism was a part. It involves a different approach to the transition to socialism. This means that many feminists in Britain regard their membership of the Communist Party and the women's movement as less contradictory than belonging to either Trotskyist groups, who believe (with tact or without it) that they should play a vanguard role, or to the Socialist Workers Party whose version of the vanguard amounts to themselves plus a well screened working class in struggle. I think the radical importance of Eurocommunism is that it opens up the possibility of rethinking together a strategy of socialism in advanced capitalism which includes members of the CP."

The criticisms of the party and the dismissal of political theory have as their basis the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class. All the stuff about learning from experience, cosiness, and love hides a hard reformist kernel.

Sheila Rowbotham emphasises time and time again that the personal is political. But she seems to mean more by this than how we relate to each other and the need to take up all

forms of oppression. She primarily sees socialism as something that grows out of us and which we build in our everyday lives — it is not something that we have to fight for and strive for by a political struggle.

Eurocommunism can adapt to feminism and to the ideas of the autonomous women's movement because it dismisses completely the central and revolutionary role of the working class. The working class becomes just one of the allies of the women's movement and part of the broad democratic alliance. All of it is linked to a thoroughly reformist strategy that the road to socialism will be accomplished peacefully and through the ballot box.

The working class and women play the role of voting fodder and their struggle is relegated to the needs of the Parliamentary strategy.

The tragic part of it [all] is that Sheila Rowbotham ends up implicitly supporting the political current which above all others stifles and destroys the self-activity of the working class [although Sheila Rowbotham has remained a committed socialist - Ed.]. Its anti-Leninism ends up with the most authoritarian and undemocratic procedures. And at the end of the day the belief that self-activity is politically central is still held primarily by those who relate to the Trotskyist tradition — the very tradition that Sheila Rowbotham is so antagonistic towards.

Max Shachtman on Trotsky's New Course

This excerpt from Leon Trotsky's "New Course", written in December 1923, delineates the fundamental characteristics of the Bolshevism which Trotsky advocated and defended against the encroachment of Stalinism.

Leninism cannot be conceived of without theoretical breadth, without a critical analysis of the material bases of the political process. The weapon of Marxian investigation must be constantly sharpened and applied. It is precisely in this that tradition consists, and not in the substitution of a formal reference or of an accidental quotation.

Least of all can Leninism be reconciled with ideological superficiality and theoretical slovenliness.

Lenin cannot be chopped up into quotations suited for every possible case, because for Lenin the formula never stands higher than the reality; it is always the tool that makes it possible to grasp the reality and to dominate it. It would not be hard to find in Lenin dozens and hundreds of passages which, formally speaking, seem to be contradictory. But what must be seen is not the formal relationship of one passage to another, but the real relationship of each of them to the concrete reality in which the formula was introduced as a lever. The Leninist truth is always concrete!

As a system of revolutionary action, Leninism presupposes a revolutionary sense sharpened by reflection and experience which, in the social realm, is equivalent to the muscular sensation in physical labor. But revolutionary sense cannot be confused with demagogical flair. The latter may yield ephemeral successes, sometimes even sensational ones. But it is a political instinct of an inferior type.

It always leans toward the line of least resistance. Leninism, on the other hand, seeks to pose and resolve the fundamental revolutionary problems.

Leninism is, first of all, realism, the highest qualitative and quantitative appreciation of reality, from the standpoint of revolutionary action. Precisely because of this it is irreconcilable with the flight from reality behind the screen of hollow agitationism, with the passive loss of time, with the haughty justification of yesterday's mistakes on the pretext of saving the tradition of the party.

Leninism is genuine freedom from formalistic prejudices, from moralising doctrinalism, from all forms of intellectual conservatism attempting to bind the will to revolutionary

action. But to believe that Leninism signifies that "anything goes" would be an irremediable mistake. Leninism includes the morality, not formal but genuinely revolutionary, of mass action and the mass party. Nothing is so alien to it as functionary-arrogance and bureaucratic cynicism.

A mass party has its own morality, which is the bond of fighters in and for action. Demagogy is irreconcilable with the spirit of a revolutionary party because it is deceitful: by presenting one or another simplified solution of the difficulties of the hour it inevitably undermines the next future, weakens the party's self-confidence.

Swept by the wind and gripped by a serious danger, demagogy easily dissolves into panic. It is hard to juxtapose, even on paper, panic and Leninism.

Leninism is warlike from head to foot. War is impossible without cunning, without subterfuge, without deception of the enemy. Victorious war cunning is a constituent element of Leninist politics.

But, at the same time, Leninism is supreme revolutionary honesty toward the party and the working class. It admits of no fiction, no bubble-blowing, no pseudo-grandeur.

Leninism is orthodox, obdurate, irreducible, but it does not contain so much as a hint of formalism, canon, nor bureaucratism. In the struggle, it takes the bull by the horns. To make out of the traditions of Leninism a supra-theoretical guarantee of infallibility of all the words and thoughts of the interpreters of these traditions is to scoff at genuine revolutionary tradition and transform it into social bureaucratism. It is ridiculous and pathetic to try to hypnotise a great revolutionary party by the repetition of the same formulae, according to which the right line should be sought not in the essence of each question, not in the methods of posing and solving this question, but in information of a biographical character.

Since I am obliged to speak of myself for a moment, I will say that I do not consider the road by which I came to Leninism as less safe and reliable than the others. I came to Lenin fighting, but I came fully and all the way. My actions in the service of the party are the only guarantee of this: I can give no other supplementary guarantees. And if the question is to be posed in the field of biographical investigation, then at least it ought to be done properly.

It would then be necessary to reply to thorny questions. Were all those who were faithful to the master in the small matters also faithful to him in the great? Did all those who showed such docility in the presence of the master thereby offer guarantees that they would continue his work in his absence? Does the whole of Leninism lie in docility? I have no intention whatever of analysing these questions by taking as examples individual comrades with whom, so far as I am concerned, I intend to continue working hand in hand.

Whatever the difficulties and the differences of opinion may be in the future, they can be victoriously overcome only by the collective work of the party's mind, checking up each time by itself and thereby maintaining the continuity of development.

This character of the revolutionary tradition is bound up with the peculiar character of revolutionary discipline. Where tradition is conservative, discipline is passive and is violated at the first moment of crisis. Where, as in our party, tradition consists in the highest revolutionary activity, discipline attains its maximum point, for its decisive importance is constantly checked in action. Thence, the indestructible alliance of revolutionary initiative, of critical, bold elaboration of questions, with iron discipline in action. And it is only by this superior activity that the youth can receive from the old this tradition of discipline and carry it on.

We cherish the tradition of Bolshevism as much as anybody. But let no one dare identify bureaucratism with Bolshevism, tradition with vacuous routine.

the historical preoccupation with the failures and treacheries of Communist Party leadership echoed the Communists' own denunciation of the same aspects of social democracy.

Even the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists have clustered round these high points where power is seen by them as becoming coercive. They have been more concerned with the corruption of the powerful—including the Communists and Trotskyists and their suppression of popular resistance. But in this critical emphasis on the leadership and on their moments of confrontation, they have nonetheless excluded most people, including most women from their version of history. The dramatic instances of conflict are extracted from their longer term context, the to-ing and fro-ing of resistance which is so evident when you focus on women's lives.

So the women's movement is contesting not simply at the level of programmes and constitutions, which is why we could never find adequate words to meet the aggressive question from men in left groups in the early days: 'Well what is it that you want?' The dispute is about an idiom of politics. (In this sense it is not only a dispute with Trotskyism.) It is about how we think about what we are doing; how we situate ourselves historically; how we see ourselves and one another in relation to the movement for change and how we see the forms in which we resist capitalist society. These open up fundamental disagreements about how you organize for socialism and what is the relationship of parties to other movements. They involve the power to define what is politics. Are left politics the preserve of professionals who hold the crucial interconnecting points? Have the rest of us merely to file under like in the game of 'oranges and lemons'?

A. The Problem of Democracy

If there was an ideal equal relationship between organizations and movements we should just pool our strengths and weaknesses and get on with it. Unfortunately it is not that simple. Bolshevism has a particularly long and sinister record in these matters which I think it's too easy to foist off onto Uncle Joe. More immediately the left groups have often been wrong in the last ten years or so but this seems only to make them more certain they hold the most complete understanding. This absurd paradox might begin to be cleared but for an enormous reluctance at the centre of organizations to say simply that they were wrong, that they have learned this or resisted that out of fears and misconceptions. These seem obvious enough things for human beings to say, not as a great beating of breasts and tearing of hair but as a basis for working together as equals. But it seems to me that a Leninist approach to organization (and here the name is important) is inconsistent with such equality, regardless of the intention of individual Leninists.

For although Leninist and Trotskyist groups acknowledge the need to learn from the working-class movement, I think that secretly they feel deep down they already know better? What else could distinguish the member from the 'contact'? Along with this inner assumption there is an acceptance of hierarchy within the organization itself. If members know better than non-members then the leaders know better than members and the world is felt to be an orderly place. Why else would they be leaders—mere staying power? The thought brings a rash of intolerable anxiety. Away with it—such psychologizing leads into the

black holes of cynicism.

But there is democratic centralism, that wonderful device without which it would be impossible for everyone to do everything at the same time. *We* know the enemy all right. Here is real socialist democracy, none of your liberal nonsense. And haven't we learned from the crimes of Stalinism? Don't we allow factions even. Don't we just!

Democratic centralism was one of the issues raised in 1956 by the men and women who left the Communist Party to form the New Left. They argued that it was inherently undemocratic. Behind the versions of democratic centralism in the Trotskyist groups and the neo-Trotskyism of the SWP now is the conviction that it is a neutral form which can be adapted in a non-Stalinist context. With this goes the belief that the basic problem of making socialism is primarily the making of a leadership through the creation of an 'efficient' organization.

Richard Kuper in 'Organization and Participation' questions the separation between efficiency and democracy. He pointed out the way in which Leninist groups still tend to reduce the criteria of success to an old-style managerial concept of efficiency at the expense of democracy, long after the real managers have caught on to the 'efficiency' of limited forms of participation.

He believes that 'it is ludicrous to believe that we can reduce the goal of the party to a simple formulation about a decisive act—the conquest of state power'.

As for the 'efficiency' of democratic centralism he says that the question of the degree of centralization we might decide is necessary, depends on our assessment of the nature of the task in hand. It requires also that we have a very general kind of agreement. If that is not present 'democratic centralism' is merely a tool to quell opposition.

Richard Kuper argues that when it is presented as an absolute rule the concept itself tends to provide a structure which is 'uniquely vulnerable to a certain kind of degeneration and one extraordinarily difficult to regenerate'.²¹

Whether we argue for a more generous or a more scrupulous interpretation of democratic centralism, or a more relative concept of the relationship between centralism and democracy, or whether we believe with Ralph Miliband that it '... has always served as a convenient device for authoritarian party structures'²² and should be simply dumped, we have to concede that the evidence of this century indicates that it is not a 'neutral' form. There has been something very funny indeed about it in practice. This has not only been a feature of Stalinism but of the more recent experience of the Trotskyist groups in the last decade. For instance it is a curious fact that the hard core of the leaderships of these groups, despite a series of palace revolutions, manage to tuck themselves into the centre into perpetuity and that bits of broken-off leaderships resurface within the splinters. They have a permanent advantage against all incipient oppositions because they are at the hub of communication and can organize to forestall resistance quicker than people who are scattered in different branches and districts. Also they are known—and better the devil you know!

Even if it gets a bit hot at the top now and then, there is a loophole. The members—poor old things, tramping around getting sore feet on their paper sales up and down all those concrete council-flat steps, getting calloused hands lassoing elusive 'contacts' over the balconies. Well they have a tendency to get routinized. Not the leadership. It is up to the leadership to spot when this is happening and leap out towards 'the class' to knock the members into shape.

Whoosh—Superman! Poor old members they look on with awe. Some get a bit grumpy. Why isn't democratic centralism binding on the leadership? Because the leaders know best. How else could they possibly be leaders? Whoosh goes Superman again, only doing his duty. How does Superman leadership know when to go whoosh towards the advanced sections of the class? Because he is leader of course. Pop go the poor members. The cosy ones fall by the wayside to seek comfort in discussion circles while the neurotic ones disappear to be cuddled in therapy groups. The intransigent form a small splinter replica. And the leaders go whoosh, whoosh all the way back to the centre.²³

Soon they are safely ensconced again with the added authority of the patent they have out now on 'the class'. No wonder leaders of Leninist groups have staying power. They are further legitimated by the respect in Leninism due to leaders and by the assumption that just as the members know better than non-members leaders know better than opposing members. The factions can stand up democratically and be counted. They can thus be rapidly isolated. But even if the opposition is based within a campaign, a movement, a trade union or community activity, there is a strong possibility that the leaders' position will prevail. The individual member will face a split loyalty between a commitment to an autonomous group and the organization. The theory says the Party must be more important. The choice is either to get out of the organization (which seems from within to be leaving socialist politics itself), to ignore the centre (in which case democratic centralism has proved unworkable), or to accept the line. So however unsectarian this socialist may be, he or she has very stark choices and a political

ideology which sanctions accepting party discipline more than helping to develop the self-activity of other people.

I am not trying to assert against this that the women's movement has found *the* answer about how we should organize. Though it is certainly worth noting that the women's movement *has* found a means of remaining connected while growing for a decade, and that shifting and spontaneous initiatives have been taken by an extremely large number of women within the movement. But I *am* arguing that the form in which you choose to organize is not 'neutral', it implies certain consequences. This has been a growing recognition on the left since the late sixties. If you accept a high degree of centralization and define yourselves as professionals concentrating above everything upon the central task of seizing power, you necessarily diminish the development of the self-activity and self-confidence of most of the people involved. Because, for the women's movement, the development of this confidence and ability to be responsible for our own lives was felt to be a priority, this became part of the very act of making a movement. The enormous weight of the inner passivity which was the result of the particular nature of the subordination of the women who became involved meant that the effort to struggle, both against the personal forms of men's control and our oppression within capitalist society, became inseparable from the struggle against the ways in which these had become internalized. We had to learn to love ourselves and other women so we could trust one another without falling back on men. We inclined consequently towards small groups, circles rather than rows, centres as information and research services, open newsletters. The attempt to avoid individual women being isolated as exceptions, either as spokesperson or as freak,

the need for our *own* movement and the **1-150g** of sisterhood came from this understanding.

I am not suggesting that such concerns are unique to women or that such forms are biologically determined. Indeed I believe that the problem of how people can overcome the passivity, self-hatred and lack of trust which is peculiar to modern capitalism is crucial for making a socialist movement—which is not to say that recognizing this as central solves the problem of how to do it.

Basically the women's movement accepts a form of 'participatory democracy' which has a long tradition from democratic religious groups to the American New Left of the late sixties and the anti-authoritarian currents in the student movement. The problems about participatory democracy are evident. If you are not able to be present you can't participate. Whoever turns up next time can reverse the previous decision. If very few people turn up they are lumbered with the responsibility. It is a very open situation and anyone with a gift for either emotional blackmail or a conviction of the need to intervene can do so without being checked by any accepted procedure. Participatory democracy only works if everyone accepts a certain give and take, a respect for one another's experience, a desire and need to remain connected. If these are present it can work very well. If they are not it can be a traumatic process. We have lived these difficulties in the history of women's movement conferences and the arguments about the Workshop Centre and Women's Day March. Despite obvious inadequacies though, 'participatory democracy' does assert the idea that everyone is responsible equally and that everyone should participate. It concedes no legitimating respect for permanent leaders or spokespeople.

It has been modified in the practice of the women's

movement by women bringing in other concepts of how to organize from tenants' groups, trades councils, trade unions or from the Labour Party, the CP and from Trotskyist and Maoist groups. Sometimes these have been met with a defensive suspicion and dismissed simply as male dominated. But in cases when the women's movement has been stronger and more confident we have been able to meet these ideas and recognize the validity of some of their criticisms. The resilience of the women's movement has been partly because of this openness. In practice what we have been doing is adapting several forms of organizing to fit the particular circumstances we are engaged in. This does not remove the dangers of 'substitutionism', or centres losing contact with local groups, or small groups of people doing all the work, or people not knowing what other people are doing. All the problems of democracy do not magically disappear. But it does make for an approach to organization which is prepared to test forms and discard or select according to the situation rather than asserting a universally correct mode. It also means that the 'movement' is perpetually outwards. As women encounter feminism they can make their own kinds of organizing depending on their needs. It is this flexibility which it is extremely important to maintain. It means that, for example, groups of women artists or groups of women setting up a creche or on the subcommittee of a trades council can decide for themselves what structure is most useful.

The women's movement shares with the 'anti-authoritarian' movements of the late sixties a commitment to a notion of democracy which does not simply recognize certain formal requirements of procedure. Obviously the danger of this is to reject completely any understanding of how these formal procedures have historically come to be

used. When the dust of the first rush of enthusiasm settles it is often handy to have them. But if we simply respond to this by dismissing 'anti-authoritarian' movements as naive and just ignorant of the 'correct' political procedure, we miss an insistence which carries a deeper meaning of democracy. Faced with the opposition of women and workers in Lotta Continua, an Italian revolutionary organization, Adriano Sofri, its founder and undisputed leader, made a self-criticism. He said democracy involved not only formally contesting theories of organization which left politics to the professionals. It involved examining his own inner sense of being a professional. It meant uncovering in public his own capacity to survive and not be frightened by political opponents. He could no longer take refuge in the objectivity of the socialist theoretician. His desire for power could no longer assume a paternal legitimation in a sense of responsibility. There was a strange sense of history repeating itself. He compared the confrontation that he faced to his own opposition, with others, to the Communist Party leadership in 1968. This was 'not a conflict over political line, but a conflict over what politics was all about'.²⁴

The encounter of the left groups with women's liberation, gay liberation and men's groups in Britain over the slower time scale of a decade has also been such a conflict and has assumed a particularly sharp form in relation to the political assumptions of Leninism held by Trotskyist groups.

B. Leaders and Cadres

Feminism has implicitly questioned the whole notion of the professional revolutionary who is cut off from other people and the training of revolutionaries which has been a feature of Leninism and Trotskyism. It is evident that if

politics are to be the domain of professionals, most women will be excluded. The emphasis on training professionals has been particularly important in the Trotskyist groups presumably because their isolation was so extreme that for a long time they could do little else. But it was important in the early days of the CP and persists still in the upper ranks of the Communist Party. Within Leninism there is a tension between the concept of leadership as the training of political administrators or theoreticians and leadership as a process of learning the ability to act in local and immediate struggles. Both the Communist Party's general approach in Britain and IS/SWP now place greater emphasis on the creation of a leadership through practical experiences than the orthodox Trotskyist groups. But despite this organizational power still tends to accrue with the political administrators at the centre of parties who are necessarily cut off from the immediate local problems of political agitation.

There was an awareness of the problems of permanent leaders in the pre-Leninist socialist movement which seems to disappear in the 1920s or become implicit. *The Miners' Next Step* (1912), for example, listed what could be the immediate short-term advantages of leaders but pointed out how the acceptance of permanent leaders also took away from people their capacity to develop initiative and responsibility.

I think it is foolish to deny that you must train people in particular skills of that certain kinds of knowledge which we need take time to develop. We need also to recognize the value of experience in agitation in which individuals can have decisive effects and of differences rather than inequalities in our abilities to do various things. But the recognition of the whole range of capacities for leadership

'inject' themselves into. It implies a politics in which the very process of radicalization carries the necessity of taking initiatives in many aspects of our lives. If this is not to be an impossible and soul-breaking ideal it requires the conscious creation of cultural forms and a personal vision of politics. I think the women's movement experience of this spreading and transformation of the idea of leadership is vital for the making of socialism.

C. The Leninist Struggle of Hand

Values, attitudes and forms of organizing are thus carried and recorded by people in the ways in which they associate. We learn not only from what is said or what we read but from our relationships with other people. This process does not mysteriously stop when we desire to associate in order to create a socialist society.

Our encounters with other people in capitalism are not free, open and equal. But there are different degrees of inequality, distance and coercion involved. These differences in degree make it possible to imagine how things might change. They force the cracks which open to illuminate the soul.

If our imagination is to be sustained by our associating, the ways we meet and co-operate and feel towards one another must develop not from our experiences of the most repressive and authoritarian encounters, but from our understandings of more loving, free ways of connecting to others and acting.

A vital feature of Lenin's concept of the Party is based on its supposed capacity to bring together, spread and transcend the limited, uneven notions and experiences of an alternative to capitalism which are present in the various sections of the working class and among the groups of

people who support them. Now this is obviously a real and enormous problem. We *are* limited and cut off by our specific experiences of oppression and by the conflict of interests between us. The disagreement is about how this can best be overcome.

Let's pretend for a moment that there *was* a revolutionary party in real life which did bring together all the elements most 'advanced' or developed in their opposition to capitalist society. Why does it follow from their bringing together in this pretend ideal party that their limitations are transcended rather than partially reflected and reproduced? If there is no conscious acknowledgement of the need to create and develop political forms which seek to overcome inequalities, and release the full potentialities of all socialists, what is there to prevent power consolidating with the powerful but moral strictures? How can the real antagonisms which are the source of division between oppressed people in capitalism disappear within the Party? Isn't this assuming that the Party is an island?

If we descend from the ideal party in the sky to more earthly groups and parties the prospect is even more gloomy. Central committees scurry like a lot of white rabbits through a series of internal and factional documents and the smaller the party the greater the hurry. In such circumstances the pressure to neglect inequalities within the organization in pursuit of the ultimate goal are great. But the theory of what a Leninist Party should be leaves hardly any space to help people participate more equally much less to develop their potential. Without any theory or structure it seems to me idealistic folly to expect 'the Party' to overcome rather than simply reflect and harness these inequalities of power which we are opposing in capitalism.

The argument used against these criticisms is always to

deny that 'the Party' or 'parties' should be places where people experience anything other than the relationships which dominate capitalism. 'This gruesome state of affairs is presented as being necessary for the working class to take power. Though it is not the working class who are to be relied on to reach this conclusion but 'the Party', which by a process like apostolic succession inherits Lenin's words. The criticisms he made of the non-Bolshevik strands in the Russian revolutionary movement are cited as vindication. These sources of dispute were undoubtedly present in the whole process internationally of Bolshevization which brought the new Communist Parties into line with Lenin's concepts of organization. And these arguments about the nature of political organization were certainly there in conflict between the Communist Party and some members of the left of the Independent Labour Party between the wars. Ironically the original Trotskyists in Britain were perhaps closer to the left of the ILP in their criticism of the CP than Trotskyist groups would now acknowledge.²⁶

This issue has involved a continuing argument between anarchists and communists. It was present in different ways in the New Left after 1956 and in the libertarian Marxism of the early 1970s. The black, gay and women's movement have been bringing the criticism more closely home, because they have raised inequalities actually *within* Leninist organizations. They have demanded that changes have to be made now. These changes involve examining how real life inequalities as opposed to ideal interpretations are disregarded and perpetuated within socialist parties. They have argued that it is not enough to declare that people should not be 'prejudiced'. The socialist organization has to create forms of associating and relating which actively seek to overcome the sexism and racism within it.

It has become more and more difficult to dismiss these demands as 'utopian'. Not only do they involve a loss of membership, but they come up again and again.

Now the problems of relationships within the Party have been discussed by Leninist organizations in the past though not in these terms. They have been seen as particular deformities which arise and have to be dealt with as they emerge. The emphasis in the Communist Party historically has been on the relationships between workers and middle-class intellectuals (mainly men). More recently it has been a tortured and painful area in the Socialist Workers Party, because of the effort to change the class basis of this organization. Both the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party have relied formally upon political education and informally upon guilt to try and curb the confidence of middle-class intellectuals. Sometimes it has been used by one group of middle-class administrators against another, or by the permanent administrators against intellectuals who might challenge the central bureaucracy. It has also been used, more understandably, by working-class people as a defence against being made to feel ignorant and humiliated by the intellectuals' use of theory as a form of power against them. But whatever the reasons this negative control through the public orchestration of personal guilt has a terrible record and disastrous ramifications. It is certainly not caused by Leninism. For instance, guilt between blacks and whites, women and men, gays and heterosexuals bedevilled the American New Left in the late sixties and early seventies. Leninism serves in fact to hold the extremes of this negative response to power relations at bay. But this is not the same as providing a solution by going directly to the sources of the antagonisms producing guilt and allowing them free expression which

implies trusting the imaginative capacity of human beings to enter one another's predicaments and learn from the attempt.

The inequalities between men and women within 'the Party' have not been given the same continuing scrutiny as class or race. But the whole issue of relationships of the sexes and the position of women within the Party were the subject of debate in the Soviet Union and in the International Communist Movement in the 1920s and early thirties. These were far-ranging in their implications despite the tendency to dismiss sex-gender conflicts as cultural or superstructural problems.

But the outcome of the debate around the organizational power of women's sections in Communist Parties had been partly pre-empted by the approach which had prevailed from the 1890s in the Second International towards the women's movements of the day. The oversimplified and sectarian dismissal of all autonomous forms of feminism with the insistence on the Social Democratic Party as the only place for women's agitation isolated many socialist women from the more radical currents within feminism.²⁷ This necessarily curtailed their capacity to question the Marxist theory of the 'woman question' or to challenge the hegemony of the male leaderships of the Social Democratic Parties. The tighter discipline of the Bolsheviks and the acceptance of democratic centralism cut off the possibility of appeal outside the parties. Under Stalin of course all forms of inner party democracy in the Soviet Union perished and with them the women's section. This had international implications.

The position of gay socialists has a much murkier record. A formal tolerance has been the best response. Homosexuality and lesbianism have either been defined as

personal questions or regarded as diversionary decadence before the emergence of the recent movement for gay liberation. On this point the educators really had to be educated.

Not until the 1960s when the black question was raised by the growing militancy of American blacks and revolutionary movements in developing countries was the power relationship between autonomous movements and socialist organizations seriously contested. In the course of this confrontation the need for autonomous movements of self-definition was clearly asserted. This was to be a decisive influence on the emergence of the women's liberation movement.

We have no clear alternative of how to combine the advantages of autonomous movements with the strengths of a more general combination. But at least we must now recognize it as a problem to face. Leninism does not 'know' the answer. It merely asserts an ideal transcendence.

There remains then no effective guarantee within Leninism that the groups who are in a dominant position in capitalism won't bring their advantage into 'the Party'. Worse there is an effective sleight of hand which conceals this inherent tendency in the assertion of the *ideal* of the Party transcending the interests and vistas of its sections.

This does not imply that we should deny that people can become stuck in their own grievances and not see the wood for the trees. There is always the temptation to attack the people in the same boat as you, as this takes the least effort and involves the least risk. The argument is about how to overcome this. We need a form of organization which can at once allow for the open expression of conflict between different groups and develop the particular understandings which all these differences bring to socialism. For

if every form of oppression has its own defensive suspicions, all the movements in resistance to humiliation and inequality also discover their own wisdoms. We require a socialist movement in which there is freedom for these differences, and nurture for these wisdoms. This means that in the making of socialism people can develop positively their own strengths and find ways of communicating to one another what we have gained, without the transcendent correctness which Leninism fosters.

The attitude towards power relations within socialist organizations has an important bearing on how such an organization will relate outwards.

Indeed opposition within the Communist Party was caught within this dilemma. Trotskyism was born in the realization of the need to combat Stalin's silencing of democratic criticism among the grass-roots of the Bolshevik Party. But Trotsky retained the assumption that the reconstituted (Trotskyist) Communist Party must be the hegemonic authority. Though both Lenin and Trotsky argued at various times that the Communist Parties must learn from workers' struggles, this was still in the terms of the director consulting the workforce. The heresy of Trotskyism, like the more conservative branches of protestantism, was limited to the claim of being the rightful church. The vital issue of democratizing the relationship between the reconstituted 'Party' and other left groupings and popular movements was not made. Though this has been a rumbling subject for concern among breakaway libertarian currents within Trotskyism it has never been resolved because Trotskyism has been confined to a minority sectarian tradition. The clash between the contemporary women's movement and the Trotskyist groups has again brought this whole issue to the surface.

III

A. Autonomy and Power

I think there is a certain tension inherent in any encounter between a group of people who are organized for a particular purpose and people who are less clearly associated. Thus a movement like women's liberation can be viewed suspiciously by groups of women involved for instance in a strike or a community project because they might fear that their needs will be used by a political organization and consumed in slogans with which they do not agree. But this distrust can be made worse or diminished depending on how it is approached. I know this is *individually* understood and acted upon by many members of Leninist and Trotskyist groups. But I also think that there is a general tendency within the Leninist approach to organizing which is inclined to dismiss these recognitions of their own members and an inclination to look elsewhere for 'mistakes'. So it is mysteriously someone else who is responsible for 'substitutionist' politics which deny the validity of actual struggles.

It has been an issue of great contention in the conflicts between the women's movement and left groups (particularly with the Socialist Workers Party in the National Abortion Campaign). It has been a source of considerable rancour between the left groups and a whole series of newspapers, journals and single issue campaigns in the last decade. I don't think it can be seen only as a feature of our recent experience or explained away as the peculiar aberrations of the contemporary left. I believe that the Leninist tradition, with its emphasis on the intervening role of the Party and the superior understanding of the Party has historically intensified these weaknesses in the

C. Working-class women and organising

Readings: Extract from AWL conference document 2008; Sylvia Pankhurst: an organiser for working-class women by Jill Mountford; Women, the heart of the resistance (Women Against Pit Closures)

From AWL conference document

The Working Women's Charter Campaign

The Working Women's Charter was drawn up by the sub-committee of the London Trades Council in March 1974. At its height it had 27 groups in towns and cities across the UK and was supported by 12 national unions, 55 trade union branches, 37 trade councils and 85 other organizations; it also published a monthly newspaper. The driving force behind the WWCC was the International Marxist Group (British section of the Fourth International). The other organisations involved in the campaign were ourselves (then the International Communist League), Workers Power and the Communist Party (who wanted the WWCC groups to be sub-committees of the Trades Councils). The International Socialists (SWP) were totally disinterested.

The campaign attempted throughout the 1970s to support women in trade union disputes, most notably at TRICO (equal pay). It worked jointly with the London-based national nurseries campaign over the extension of nursery facilities and against cuts in local authority nurseries. The WWCC emphasised the importance of women pursuing their claims through direct action rather than by taking cases under the Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act — the preferred option by the trade union bureaucracy (Ford Dagenham).

The women (and some men) active around the Charter in the main regarded themselves as socialist feminists and saw the Charter as a way of taking feminist ideas into the trade union and labour movement.

Problems

Although the WWCC had the support of most of the large trade unions, this was on the whole mainly tokenistic. There were attempts made to build WWCC caucuses in the trade unions but the campaign failed to achieve this aim and the support for the Charter remained largely paper support. This was reinforced by those in the campaign, most notably the IMG, who had an orientation towards the leadership of the major unions and failed to see the importance of focusing on building up strong groups that could build links with local trade unionists and orientate towards the needs of working class women. As the local groups increasingly floundered and failed to find a focus for their activity, they fell into passive propagandising of the Charter's demands.

There was also a split between the national committee of the Charter and the local groups who believed that those

on the National Committee (dominated by the left organisations) were uninterested in the local groups and more interested in fighting among themselves and pushing their own particular perspectives on the future of the campaign. This was partly due to the fact that there was some in the campaign who had a somewhat anarchistic attitude towards organisation and were hostile to the left whatever they did. There was also criticism from many that the left had an obsession with employed women and did not take up issues that involved women in the community.

The high point of the campaign was a mass rally that was organized at Alexander Palace, North London 'One Year On from the SDA – A Rally for Women's Rights'. The rally failed to resolve the internal and external challenges facing the campaign, to work out how to integrate the local groups more into the national campaign, develop campaigns, both at work and in the community, how to involve working class women and build links with trade unionists (the ICL did argue for this). After the rally the national body instead concentrated on the need to amend the Charter and on the structure of the campaign. This resulted in yet more acrimony and suspicion and by about 1976(?) most of the local groups had dissolved.

Many of the Charter demands have become a reality, but the majority still have yet to be achieved and, of course, will not be achieved without a massive fight. For example, aim no 6 of the Charter fights for "improved provision of local authority day nurseries, free of charge, with extended hours to suit working mothers" – the privatisation of childcare has made this demand even less of a reality than it was in 1974. Many of the demands expressed in No 10 of the Charter (women and trade unions) have been taken up by trade unions, however in the context of a hollowed out movement, with low participation, these have mostly ended up benefited careerist elements in the trade union movement.

After the WWCC collapsed, the SWP launched Women's Voice – but that's another sorry story.

A working-class women's movement

We developed this policy for the women's movement of the 1970s. But we did not see this autonomous women's movement as being a unique or one-off event under capitalism. As long as capitalism continues, as long as women's specific oppression continues to be maintained and intrinsic to capitalist organisation, autonomous women's movements will emerge again and again.

We want such a movement to emerge because they will be a necessary part of the liberation of women. We cannot however will them into existence nor can we predict when they will emerge or precisely what they will look like.

When a mass or sizeable autonomous women's movement emerges we should intervene constructively to build it, learn from it and orient it to the working class. There can be no effective women's movement without connections into and leverage in the women's movement. (Equally there can be no revitalised working class movement without

Questions for discussion

- The Working Women's Charter is an example of socialist feminist campaigning during Second Wave feminism. What picture do you get from this reading about its strengths and weaknesses.
- List the political "attributes" of Sylvia Pankhurst's East London group and Women's Against Pit Closures. Is there any overlap?
- Is the idea of a working-class women's movement relevant to contemporary feminism?

women organising and asserting their rights).

We try to orient the women's movement by arguing for a mass working-class based women's movement.

This is how we described the policy in 1976:

"The focus on working class women expressed in 'mass working-class-based women's movement' while being non-ultimatic politically [it does not call for a "communist women's movement, reference to a contemporary argument], does however contain our essential concerns and implicitly our central idea that the liberation of women and the class struggle of the proletariat are organically linked and inseparable. Agitation for such a movement will be possible and will bear fruit with wide layers of women who, while not accepting our basic conception, do recognise that working class women are the most oppressed and will recognise that a real women's movement must reach the masses of women who happen to be also the most oppressed."

We saw the slogan/policy as a transitional demand. And as a starting point for us argue for the organic link between women's liberation and proletarian liberation. Indeed combining socialist propaganda with the demand (and organising as a women's fraction) was an essential part of how the policy was argued for.

Women's Fightback

Started out in 1979 as women and working-class activists were pondering the lessons of the miserable 1974-9 Labour government and looking at how to fight the Thatcher government. Socialist Organiser, the forerunner of Workers' Liberty/Solidarity, made an initiative to try to get a united front of labour movement and women's groups against the Tory attacks on maternity pay rights.

The first conference of WF, sponsored by a wide range of labour and women's organisations drew 500 women. The focus broadened out from maternity rights.

Women's Fightback went on to produce a monthly newspaper, a Labour Party women's newsletter, hold successful conferences, organise in the miners' strike.

Women's Fightback came at a time when many feminists were looking for longer-term strategies. The labour movement was a visible alternative focus — anti-cuts campaigns, strikes, rank and file revolt in the Labour Party. The decline of the Labour left after 1982 and the defeat of the miner's strike sapped and narrowed WF. By the late 1980s it had become a much smaller campaign.

Sylvia Pankhurst: an organiser for working class women by Jill Mountford

"The name of our paper, the Woman's Dreadnought, is symbolic of the fact that the women who are fighting for freedom must fear nothing. It suggests also the policy of social care and reconstruction which is the policy of awakening womanhood throughout the world, as opposed to the cruel, disorganised struggle for existence amongst individuals and nations from which Humanity has suffered in the past... the chief duty of the Dreadnought will be to deal with the franchise question from the working-woman's point of view... (and) to review the whole field of the women's emancipation movement."

From the first edition of the Women's Dreadnought

On International Women's Day (March 8, 1914) Sylvia Pankhurst, having been expelled from the suffragette organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), by her mother, Emmeline, and sister, Christabel, launched a working class women's paper, the Women's Dreadnought, in the East End of London. With a guaranteed circulation of 20,000 Sylvia and the East London Fed-

eration of Suffragettes (ELFS) had a tremendous vehicle for a dialogue with broad layers of working women and, as time passed, working men.

From the first edition Sylvia saw the Dreadnought as being "...a medium through which working women, however unlettered, might express themselves, and find their interests defended."

She later recalled how "From all over the East End, and much further afield, people in dispute with, or suffering under, employers, landlords, insurance agents, government departments, local authorities, hospitals and asylums, lawyers and railway companies brought their difficulties for publicity and solution". From the beginning the paper was this and more besides. It rapidly gained the reputation of a broad, non-sectarian paper and evolved into a paper concerned with questions that faced the working class here and abroad.

Sylvia had moved to the East End two years earlier in 1912, convinced of the need for "the creation of a women's movement in that great abyss of poverty (that) would be a call and a rallying cry to the rise of similar movements in all parts of the country".

Unlike her mother and sister, Sylvia had not deserted her socialist roots. Instead, her beliefs had become firmer, more developed and more determined over the years. In stark contrast to her mother and sister she did not see the right to vote as an end in itself. The movement she built in the East End was according to Sylvia "not merely for votes but towards an egalitarian society - an effort to awaken the women submerged in poverty to struggle for better social conditions and bring them into line with the most advanced sections of the movement of the awakened proletariat".

Her fervour, drive and enthusiasm for building a working class women's movement convinced feminists in established branches of the WSPU to lend their support in setting up the East London Federation (ELF) of the WSPU (as it was called from 1912 to 1914).

She wrote: "I induced the local WSPUs to assist in organising it: Kensington, Chelsea, and Paddington made themselves responsible for shops in Bethnal Green, Limehouse and Poplar respectively, and Unions, even so far afield as Wimbledon, sent speakers and canvassers. WSPU headquarters agreed to be responsible for the rent of a shop in Bow. An intensive campaign like that of an election, to include deputations to local MPs, was to culminate in a demonstration in Victoria Park."

Just weeks after arriving in the East End, Sylvia had working women willing to join ELF. Nellie Cressall was one such working woman. She said: "In 1912 I met Sylvia and others. I had been thinking for some time of the unequal rights of men and women... after talking to Sylvia and other speakers I thought that here is something I can dedicate myself to help in some way to put things right."

Sylvia described how "women flocked to our meetings; members joined in large numbers. I at once began urging them to speak, taking classes for them indoors, and inducing them to make a start outdoors by taking the chair for me at a succession of short meetings in the side streets where workers lived, or by the market stalls in the shopping hours".

She had no doubts that the emancipation of working women would be an act of self-emancipation. No middle class woman could do it for them. She was completely convinced of working women's abilities. Recognising this, once they had gained the confidence to speak many became powerful orators, better able to put their case and that of other working women than any middle class women could do on their behalf.

Working women activists from ELF went with Sylvia to talk to women in other branches of the WSPU in places like Kensington and Mayfair. Sylvia said: "Their speeches made

a startling impression upon those women of another world, to whom hard manual toil and the lack of necessities were unknown." She recounted the passion of Melvina Walker, who had worked as a domestic servant: "She seemed to me like a woman of the French Revolution. I could imagine her on the barricades, waving the bonnet rouge, urging on the fighters with impassioned cries. When in full flood of her oratory, she appeared the very embodiment of toiling, famine-ridden, proletarian womanhood."

Another woman called Mrs Schlette, "well in her sixties" was "soon able to hold huge crowds for an hour and a half at a stretch".

Christabel, who declared "working women (to be in) the weakest position of the sex", berated Sylvia for organising with and fighting alongside working class women. She argued that it was "... a mistake to use the weakest for the struggle! We want picked women, the very strongest and most intelligent".

Sylvia abhorred such middle class superiority. Her affinity with the oppressed and downtrodden, her understanding of how capitalism works and objection to the idea of superior and inferior human beings led to her fighting racism and fascism, as well as for women's rights and broader socialist ideals. Her anti-racist and anti-fascist work was way ahead of other white left activists of the time, and a very strong case can be put that she made a special, even unique, contribution here.

Her expulsion from the WSPU was in fact the result of her speaking, contrary to Christabel's wishes, on a platform alongside James Connolly and others at the Royal Albert Hall. The meeting was to demand the release of Jim Larkin (an activist in the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union) and to build support for workers involved in the Dublin Lock-out of that time. There was a crowd of 10,000 people. Sylvia said that she had agreed to speak so that she could point out that "behind every poor man there was a still poorer woman". She saw it as her responsibility "to keep our working women's movement in touch with the working class movement".

For Christabel this was the last straw. She said: "We want all our women to take their instructions and walk in step like an army!"

Expulsion from the WSPU meant more than a break from the organisation, though. It meant breaking the personal ties with her mother and her sister - a painful process. Sylvia's commitment to the WSPU, even when she thought their tactics wrong, was second to none. She was imprisoned and force-fed more times than most other suffragettes. But Sylvia was more, much more than a suffragette. She was a socialist.

So despite her hurt at being expelled from an organisation she had for 11 years been committed to, and in being cut off from her family, in the spirit of the best traditions in our movement, Sylvia wasted no time in getting on with the political task in hand.

Within weeks of her expulsion, with the help of other women in ELFS (as it then became known) she put together the first issue of the *Woman's Dreadnought*.

In May, she and others organised a Women's May Day Procession in Victoria Park. In June, only six months after her ejection from the WSPU she had pulled off an important meeting with Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister.

Sylvia, threatening indefinite hunger strike if he didn't agree to meet, and with some negotiations from her close friend Keir Hardie, got Asquith to agree to receive a deputation of women from her organisation. Though she drafted a statement to be read out, she did not attend the meeting (an almost unique event) herself. Instead six "working mothers" selected by mass meetings went forward "to speak for themselves... the statement would give them their cue and break the ice for them. I had put into it what I knew

to be near their hearts".

The women gave "well-reasoned" arguments as to why they should be given the vote. Highlighting the toil and hardship of working class women's lives they put their case intelligently and with dignity.

By August 1914 the gulf between herself and her mother and sister widened dramatically as Britain entered the war. Sylvia opposed the war, and in no uncertain terms. On the other hand, Emmeline and Christabel led the WSPU into unreserved support for the British ruling class. They renamed their paper the *Britannia* and took to the streets handing out white feathers to men not wearing uniform. From radical arsonists to patriotism personified, Emmeline and Christabel called for the conscription of women to fight the "German Peril" - a year before conscription for men was even introduced! They even called for the right to vote of men fighting as a priority over women!

The repugnant degeneration of Emmeline and Christabel is made even worse when compared to what was probably Sylvia's finest work. The movement she built in the East End was the result of consistent hard work; of actually being part of the day-to-day grind of life in the East End. From the beginning of the war she initiated and organised to relieve the misery of the poverty of working women and their families.

Sylvia's work here was not that of the *Lady Bountiful*, like much of the relief work of the time. Sylvia's work was that of a socialist, an internationalist, a revolutionary. The ELFS set up cost-price workers' restaurants and baby clinics to deal with the malnutrition and common childhood illnesses that ravaged and all too often killed the children of the working class; it set up nurseries and a toy factory, and all this at the same time as producing a weekly newspaper. Working class women managed and ran these services for themselves. They were able to take some control of important aspects of their lives in the most adverse circumstances. And it was through this crucial work that Sylvia was able to gradually win over working people to oppose the war as it was not in their interests, and to support many causes that were in the interests of working class people everywhere.

Organising marches and demonstrations for a woman's right to vote, calling for equal pay for equal work and an end to the "sweating trades", Sylvia and ELFS were able to mobilise thousands of women and men.

Walter Holmes, eventually a journalist on the Communist Party paper, the *Daily Worker*, talked of his direct experience of Sylvia during the early war years in a tribute to her after her death in 1960: "What she aroused in the East End was a mass movement. Not only an enthusiastic following of young working class women joined in her franchise campaign... young workers came with them... They filled the streets with their marching. The Red Flag and The Internationale resounded under the dim lights of 1914-15... Sylvia Pankhurst contributed a powerful opposition to the imperialist war."

The *Woman's Dreadnought* fast gained the reputation of an open, broad paper, attempting to offer basic socialist education; practical advice on all sorts of things from dealing with bailiffs to organising rent strikes; agitation for women's rights, for the vote, equal pay and end to the "sweating trades"; detailed reports on what was going on in Parliament. From the beginning it covered international events and issues and, by 1915-16, had articles highlighting the plight of interned Germans. In 1916, the *Woman's Dreadnought* gave extensive coverage to the Easter Rising and frequently raised the banner for Irish liberation. In 1917, Siegfried Sassoon chose the *Dreadnought* to first publish his famous statement opposing the war. As always, Sylvia showed tremendous courage in publishing views and ideas that laid herself and the paper wide open to raids, bans and arrest.

By 1916 ELFS had changed its name to the Workers' Suffrage Federation, both reflecting and having helped to create a general shift in the labour movement towards a genuine fight for adult human suffrage. In 1917 the *Woman's Dreadnought* became the *Workers' Dreadnought* inspired by the rank and file activism in Britain and the Bolshevik-led workers revolution in Russia. Still with a circulation of around 10,000 the *Workers' Dreadnought*, continued to have an important impact and influence. Sylvia's work remained diligent and consistent, relentlessly making propaganda for the overthrow of the capitalist system and in support of the Russian Russia.

Increasingly, the paper carried articles and reprints of works by most of the leading socialists and revolutionaries. Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and even Trotsky can be found in the pages of the *Workers' Dreadnought*. In one copy of a 1917 paper alongside extensive coverage of the Russian Revolution was the first part of a discussion on childcare, looking at the contribution to thinking in this area by the radical Maria Montessori (now revered by the middle class and an expensive, private alternative to state nursery schools) - at the time an important and practical contribution to early years education for children of poor working class families.

In 1918, Sylvia established the People's Russia Information Bureau. With a small financial contribution from Moscow, the Bureau's work was to put out pro-Bolshevik propaganda to workers in Britain.

Harry Pollitt, who later became the General Secretary of the Communist Party, said that the work that Sylvia did amongst the working class of the East End was to lay the foundations for the refusal of East London dockers to load munitions on to the *Jolly George*, a ship bound for Russia and the White Army, in 1920. Sylvia's organisation, the Workers Socialist Federation (previously the Workers Suffrage Federation) was the first left group in Britain to affiliate to the newly formed Third International (Comintern). In her capacity of Secretary of the WSF, Sylvia wrote to Lenin about the pressing question of left groups in Britain affiliating to the Labour Party and any newly formed Communist Party relationship to the Labour Party and parliamentarism. Sylvia held an ultra-left position, and was in a minority amongst the serious left in Britain. Lenin disagreed with her; he wrote an initial reply in the form a letter and later responded to Sylvia and many others in *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Sylvia was invited to attend the Second Congress of the Comintern to put her case.

Around this time the WSF, alongside the British Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party, and South Wales Socialist Societies, were in unity talks about establishing a Communist Party in Britain. Once set up, Sylvia's relationship with the CPGB was short lived. She was in prison during the inaugural conference in January 1921 in Leeds. On her release, the CPGB discussed closing the *Dreadnought* down, arguing the party should speak with just one voice - applying, perhaps, the logic of the Russian situation to the very different British situation. Sylvia argued that the *Dreadnought* remained a popular paper, with a strong reputation and readership, and that the party could cope with, indeed benefit from, a variety of publications. Sylvia was expelled from the CPGB on release from prison. Weak and depressed by the experience of her latest incarceration and the general political situation, the CPGB showed little tolerance towards her or democracy.

Sylvia's drift from independent working class politics started here, and was gradually replaced by anti-racist and anti-fascist work. In 1927 she shocked and horrified many inside and outside of the establishment when she gave birth to Richard Pankhurst, her first and only child. Sylvia was 45 years old and unmarried, but remained a brave, free spirit,

still totally unafraid of swimming against the tide. Motherhood seems to have pulled her back towards fighting for the woman's cause, campaigning for maternity rights and better conditions for working class women and children. She died aged 78 in Ethiopia, having made it her home four years earlier on the invitation of Haile Selassie, though her relationship with this country started in 1935 when she got involved with supporting the liberation of Ethiopia.

Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst was born into a family of middle class, radical socialists. She trained as an artist and could have led a comfortable middle class life, expressing herself through her art. Having just turned 20 Sylvia vowed she could not return to art having seen the poverty and misery experienced by so many.

Sylvia Pankhurst should not be seen as extraordinary because she was a woman, though she was an extraordinary woman, but because she was an extraordinary human being and an equal to any man of her time.



The world turned upside down

"At a time of unrest and strike action, the proletarian woman, downtrodden, timid, without rights, suddenly grows and learns to stand tall and straight. The self-centred narrow-minded and politically backward "female" becomes an equal, a fighter, a comrade. The transformation is unconscious and spontaneous, but it is important and significant because it reveals the way in which participation in the workers' movement brings the woman worker towards her liberation, not only as the seller of labour power, but also as a woman, a wife, a mother and a housekeeper."

Alexandra Kollontai wrote that in 1920, yet it could be about today. Alexandra was writing a history of working class Russian women with whom she fought, as a socialist and sister, against the Tsarist tyranny. The development and organisation of those women then is comparable to the spirit of the women today, organising in Women Against Pit Closures groups.

The Russian women Kollontai writes of were struggling for basic rights of bread, peace and land. They fought alongside their male counterparts but fought also for their self-liberation as women.

Women Against Pit Closures was much more than a support group of women fighting for the jobs of their husbands, sons, brothers, lovers.

At first, women responded to the strike by providing essential services — organising food distribution, soup kitchens, etc.

A new awareness

Within weeks, women were not just staffing the soup kitchens but organising pickets, rallies, demonstrations, collections and public speaking.

"On early pickets, 2.30 am and 4.30 am, too early to go back to bed. Back in an hour or two or three. Stay up to see the kids up and breakfast. Food parcels to go out 11 am - 3 pm. Back for the kids coming home. Tea time. Meeting, social security problems to sort out. Someone needs shoes for the picket line. Someone is depressed. Fund-raising needs organising. Provisions need buying for the food parcels, and parcels need making up, 500 of them..."

The list of tasks is endless and gruelling. Most women doing this have kids, some like Ann from Kiveton Park have jobs to do as well. Some like Mary from Wales have to stop a husband and son going back to work.

Clearly the strike could not have got this far if it were not for the dynamic, forceful organisation of women in the pit villages. The level of solidarity they have provided has been unrivalled by any other section of the organised labour movement.

Crusty socialists still maintain that the self-organisation of women is by nature divisive and what is more, working class women just don't do it. Really?

Women Against Pit Closures have turned such arguments on their head.

"It was as though women had been asleep for hundreds of years. We awoke to a



Photo: Martin Jenkinson/Yorkshire Miner

new awareness, a realisation of what we as women could do. It is only comparable to the suffragettes. Do you know, I believe we are a part of history being made" (from South Yorkshire).

The aspirations raised by women involved in the strike can only take us forward. Women have gained much by breaking their

isolation, having childcare more available and collective eating. We must now organise around such demands as 24 hour, free nurseries, a woman's right to choose and collective facilities.

"After the strike we will keep ourselves together and do you know what we'll do first! We'll have a campaign against low

pay because it hits women — and we'll start with the women in the canteen and bar staff — get them a pay rise, something the NUM should have done" (from South Yorkshire).

In a traditionally male dominated set-up, many men are acknowledging the contribution of women and respecting their need for independence. A sense of equality has been reached far greater than at any other time of our working class history.

At the same time, women have witnessed in themselves changing consciousness and political awareness which makes them say "We cannot go back to the status quo". Kids have eaten better in the collective soup kitchens, shopping has a whole new meaning — it's collective or non-existent because it's distributed, shared and some days you don't have to do it at all.

Women get out more, go off in flying pickets, go to meetings or even get away to parties...organised by support groups. Women meet other women in struggle, from Greenham Common, from Barking and South London Hospitals, from Namibia, from Ireland.

Women do not want to return to the status quo. That means we have to take up women's demands and fight for them here and now. Women have fought alongside their men in the NUM because they realise that if the NUM is smashed then our hopes of equality and liberation will be that harder to fight for.

Working class women, normally isolated and alienated in the home have come out, got together and organised with determination to win.

Though circumstances are the most materially severe and repressive they have ever experienced, there has been a sense of freedom gained. It has cut across much of the mythology of women's "natural" role, leading them to question their former selves.

Cooking Picket Pie

The Women's Action group has been working hard since the early weeks of the strike. We've been providing families with three food parcels a week, since we don't have cooking facilities in our club.

We started off by raising voluntary funds ourselves — by going out in the street with the NUM banner and standing out all morning. We got some funny looks at first, but soon contributions started coming in.

We also go to Rotherham to collect, but the funds are drying up now. We've bled our own areas dry. If people are not unemployed, they're pensioners or strikers — mind you, some pensioners are our best supporters.

We also run a weekly coffee morning

and jumble sale and run raffles all the time. Last month we had a good laugh holding a funny football match between the women and the "flying pickets". We didn't raise much money but we got a lot out of our system.

We cook at home in my kitchen and so when pickets get back we have a home-baked meat pie and peas — it's called Picket Pie — and we can't cook anything else now, the men won't have it.

Some weeks we cook three or four times but because you don't always know when it's required, it's difficult to have a rota. Also you can't cope with more than two people cooking in my kitchen!

Ann Bowns interviewed in Socialist Organiser, August 16, 1984



Women march in London, August 11. Photo: Andrew Ward, Report.

Build a working class women's movement!

In 1981 12 million workers were members of a trade union, of whom 30% were women.

When you look at the people in the leadership of the trade unions and of the TUC, how many women do you see?

And that's at a national level. At a local level of areas and branches, it is just as bad if not worse. In unions where the majority of

members are women, the people in the decision-making positions tend to be men.

What are the reasons for this? Many men are convinced that it's because women aren't interested: we only work for pin money anyway — it's the men who earn the family wage.

Actually the reasons are more practical

than that: meetings tend to be held at times women with families can't attend, creche facilities are not provided at meetings, and because the issues that affect women both at home, at work, their conditions, etc., are not taken seriously, or even seen as trade union issues.

Over the last few years, women have organised in the trade unions to change this situation, and the issues we have been taking up are those that enable women to attend — meeting times, creches, and positive discrimination.

Positive discrimination means encouraging women to take up positions and get involved in the union; it means that a certain number of positions in the union will be reserved for women only, to ensure that women are encouraged to be in the decision making and active role in their union.

A lot of people both on the left and right argue against positive discrimination, saying that we should vote people into positions on the basis of their politics.

'If we'd been organised before...'

We were saying last week how if the women in the village had been organised a couple of years ago the way we are now they would never have got those schools shut. Never. We would have fought...

We had some problems with one of the blokes at the pit here, he really is a male chauvinist pig... He comes out with 'Oh, the one with big tits'.

I mean, it was really insulting, so we had him about it, and we said we didn't like it... We said things like 'how would

you like it if we described you as the one with the little bulge in your trousers?' He just went bright red. He couldn't handle it at all. So we said, 'Well, that's how we feel'...

Coal mining is swamped in tradition, and the tradition is that it is a man's job and it's no place for a woman. But the attitudes have changed very much during the strike.

Sylvia Jackson, from Keresley (Coventry) miners' wives' committee. Socialist Organiser June 14 1984.

Miners at Greenham

Three striking Notts miners visited Greenham Common peace camp on June 28. Afterwards they spoke to Angela Fraser.

'Why did you ask me to take you to Greenham?'

'To see how the women were struggling. It was an experience. I was really frightened, but I enjoyed the visit.'

'Why were you frightened?'

Because of what the media have said about them. They are not really like that...

It's like the miners. Everybody's expecting the miners to start trouble and it's the same with the women there. They are made out to be right freaks.

'Do you see any link between the miners' strike and the Greenham women's struggle?'

They're fighting for what they believe in, aren't they... They're fighting for loads of things, aren't they? They're fighting for equal rights for women. We're supposed to

have that now. Well, what can I say? It is supposed to be equal rights for women but it's always been the same — men always seem to be the most dominant. I think they're fighting to do something on their own. They need to keep men out of it because of that.

'When you go back home, will you encourage women to go and stay at Greenham?'

I don't really know — I'm not so sure.

In fact, most of the time, men get re-elected year after year on personal likes and dislikes, making the movement quite stale and not moving forward with new people or bringing in new and younger people into union activity. So positive discrimination is actually a democratic thing in that it opens it out to new people.

Secondly, such is the oppression of women in society that prevents us getting involved that we have to make special attention and arrangements to allow women to get involved.

I don't just mean meeting times and creches but also sexist attitudes we face every day which make coming to meetings and getting involved very intimidating. At union conferences you're whistled at as you walk to the rostrum; or in local branches they sneer at women and make comments about our breasts.

That is one of the issues that women organising in the union must and do take up — sexual harassment. Not only at work by management (in the typing pool, etc), but also by the union — for example nude calendars.

Women are organising in the Labour Party and forcing it to change its politics and structure in a very small way. But there is still a long way to go.

For example, every year there is a national women's conference in the Labour Party and quite often it is a section of the Labour Party which takes up more militant positions than the rest of the party. It was, for example, the only section which opposed the sending of the Task Force to the Falklands. They supported Benn for deputy leader, they have a position of troops out of Ireland and they were one of the sections to back the moves to democratise the way the leader and deputy leader of the party are elected.

But women's conference does not have a right to put to Labour Party conference as a whole any policies that it adopts, so it's



more like a lobby than an active section of the Party.

Also, the women's conference does not have the right to vote women onto the Labour Party National Executive Committee.

The women's movement

Meanwhile, the women's movement from the 1960s to the present, has tended to be a middle class movement. It does take up issues that should concern all working class women such as the right to abortion — control over our own bodies — the questions of sexuality and gay and lesbian liberation, the right to walk the streets without fear of attack, against the portrayal by the police and courts of victims of rape as if they asked for it, etc.

But to a large extent the movement has organised in a way which does not attract working class women. Women's movement meetings tend to be consciousness-raising groups, and many elements in the women's

movement refuse to have anything to do with the Labour Party or the unions because they see them as male-dominated.

Consciousness-raising is all right. It is necessary for every woman to be able to meet other women and discuss their oppression and talk about how they are isolated in the home and how the law discriminates against them. But if you stop at just talking about it and don't put those ideas into action and force the labour movement to take them up, it becomes a futile exercise.

The miners' strike opens up the possibility of breaking down this division between a male-dominated labour movement and a middle-class women's movement — of building a working-class based women's movement.

The miners' strike and particularly the women's involvement in it, forces the labour movement to see women as political, active, militant people who don't just sit at home and soak in the media, or just work for pin money or can be treated as mere sex objects. It really does challenge all those attitudes which the male labour movement has lived by for years.

We need to discuss how that challenge to men's attitudes can be sustained after the strike has been won. How do we make sure that those lessons learned during the strike (like the men who now tell other men to shut up when they come out with "Get your tits out", and the men in the labour movement who can no longer say "women aren't interested in politics, they just organise get back to work movements" and things like that) aren't forgotten but become a way of changing the labour movement into one which includes women and seriously takes up women's issues?

And also how do we use the lessons to make the women's movement a movement for working class women rather than middle class consciousness-raising groups?

Women in the labour movement

The growth of women's support groups since the start of the miners' strike has been a tremendous boost to the women's movement in Britain. The Tory government have not been able to buy them off or use them as propaganda against the NUM.

Their courageous stand has given confidence to working class women everywhere who, over the years, have been attacked by the policies of cuts, redundancies, extra police powers and media lies.

All the women involved in WAPC are determined that their groups will not just

disappear when the miners' strike is over, because there are still so many battles to be fought.

The only way that this can be ensured is if all working class women in struggle join together and fight together — not just against the Tories' attacks which throw us out of work and treat us as second class citizens, but also to force the labour movement to take our battles seriously and to give us equal voice.

The militant action of working class women can only strengthen the labour movement and democratise it.

Socialist Organiser, January 9, 1985