

# We are not your slaves!

Are women workers any closer to equality with men?

By Helen Rate

**I**N Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world, more women are waged workers than ever before. In Britain this trend has been particularly pronounced.

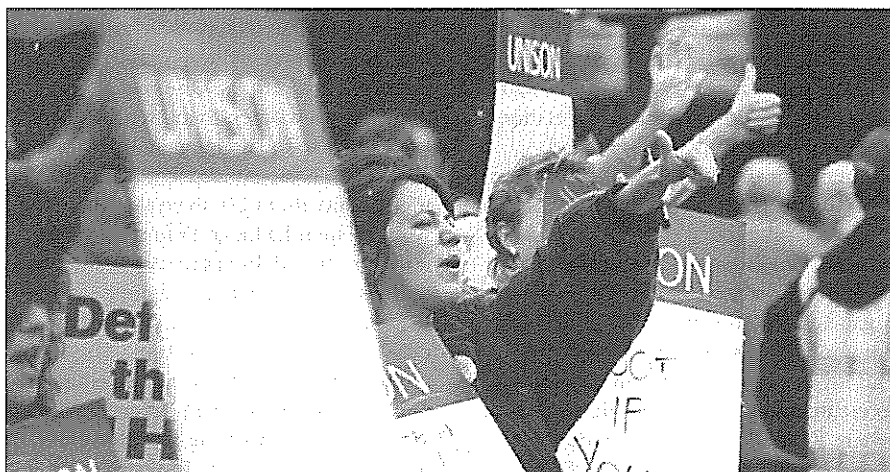
At the beginning of the eighties feminists and socialists liked to predict that the Tories, in a fit of revenge against homebusting working women, would drive women back into the home. We were particularly concerned about married women (or women with partners) and women with children. But most of these women stayed in waged work: in 1993/4 46% of all women with pre-school children and 63% of married women with children, were working. Single mothers were not so fortunate. The employment rate for these women has declined from 49% in 1979-81 to 39% in 1993/4.

Overall more women were working in the 1990s than at the beginning of the 1980s. But only slightly more. In 1995 64% of all women of working age were in employment; in 1981 61%. Bigger increases came in the '70s (52% of women were working in 1971).

The proportion of men in waged work has dropped, whilst the proportion of women in the workforce has increased (to 44% in 1993, from 37% in 1971). As this proportion increases, women have come up against barriers to employment.

According to the government female unemployment is about 7% (compared to 10% for men), but the government's count of women who are "actively seeking work" excludes many women with partners who do not sign on but still looking for work.

The Tories' cuts in welfare provision, their privatisation of the economy and their introduction of a market in health and education services have put a lot of pressure on an already shaky family structure. That has increased the burdens of women's lives, in some ways bolstered women's traditional role in the family and kept women away from the world of work. Women care for sick and disabled relatives at home — a consequence of



the way the Tories have implemented "community care" — more often than men.

There is also a long history of poor public childcare provision in Britain. Even during the war, when millions of women were mobilised to "serve" in the war industries, only a quarter of working mothers got help. After the war most nurseries were closed down.

Working-class women, many of them mothers, wanted to work. A "compromise" — the creation of part-time jobs for these women — was found, which enabled the Establishment to balance their need for female labour and the need to prop up the family, and its vital role in reproducing the next generation of wage slaves.

So began a trend which continued until it became a "norm" for *all* women, including married women and women with children, to work. In the past working-class women with children had worked at home — taking in washing or the like. Now we had "proper" jobs in the "official" economy; but the state would not bother with providing childcare. Grannies, neighbours, relatives and childminders had to fill the gap.

The Tories have been forced into "doing something" about childcare. There has been pressure from employers. The Tories have had to recognise that women are a *useful* but also a *permanent* part of the workforce. This recognition represents progress for women.

Unfortunately the results of the government's shift in childcare policy have been pitiful: a cranky nursery voucher

scheme which has been criticised by the Tory-run local authorities where it has been piloted!

There are still only 985,000 day care places available in Britain. The biggest area of expansion in childcare over the last 10 years has been in registered childminders. Women have been able to get into waged work through the creation of thousands of extremely low-paid jobs for other women! Publicly funded provision in local authority nurseries has been substantially reduced, while private nurseries have grown, making nursery provision even less accessible for low-paid working-class women.

Many women, and men too, want to spend more time bringing up their children, but what choices do they have? Staying at home means poverty for women and their families. In the era of mass male unemployment and generalised low wages, women's earnings have become more necessary; male unemployment has made many women the sole "breadwinners". In Afro-Caribbean families a woman's income is likely to be of even greater significance because of the low labour market status of black men.

There are limits on female employment — job cuts, welfare cuts, the lack of childcare — and these factors are partially bound up with ruling class bolstering of the family. But there is a powerful economic push for working-class women to go out to work, one which has not even been inhibited by the appalling lack of childcare provision. The poverty and hardship which generates that push is hardly likely to go away under a Labour government.

**W**OMEN'S work is usually low paid — three million women would benefit from a minimum wage set at £4.26. Naturally, capitalism needs the cheapest workers available. These have been thus far been women — as long as they have the skills, and plenty of jobs in modern capitalism don't need that many skills. Low pay has been determined by sex-segregation in the economy. Perhaps this accounts for the lack of a male backlash against women working (although there will be a lot of conflict in relationships between individual men and women over the issue). Also, men often have to accept the economic necessity of women working.

Part-time work — and 50% of all women workers work part-time — is ill-organised and low-paid. Part-time work is not a modern invention. However, today employers are using part-time contracts to create and reshape a whole workforce where flexibility and low pay dominate. Despite the intervention of the Euro-bureaucracy part-time work still means fewer rights.

Flexible work is a very mixed blessing for women. A school term contract sounds like a good idea, but it is only a realistic option for women whose wages are high enough they can afford to take 3 months off every year. And media and government hype of "teleworking" is a bit rich when you consider most wage work done in the home is extremely low-paid piece work.

The part-time "sector" of the economy is undergoing a transformation. The number of hours that part-time employees work is decreasing. The part-time employment of men is rising, or rather men can no longer expect to be in full-time jobs. Most of the new jobs created in recent years have been part time, and many of these have been taken by men. An estimated 38% of all employees are now part-time workers. There has also been a drive for greater productivity — workers have to do the same amount of or more work in less time. The conditions, if not always the wage rates, of women and men's work are moving closer together.

**I** WOULD argue that working-class women have made real, if partial, progress by their increased participation in waged work. Women are now seen to be and regard themselves as independent individuals. Women will sacrifice a lot in order to be able to earn their weekly pittance because work gives some freedom, a chance to escape the isolation of the home, to be with workmates, to have some self-respect.

However, for many working-class women the experience of going to work is miserable: juggling with a hundred daily tasks, coping with many small disasters, and facing the grinding purposelessness of "working to pay the childminder". Also women still earn on average 72% of men's rates. Often women have only added another kind of slavery — wage-slavery — to traditional domestic slavery, which continues to fall in the main to us. One recent estimate shows women living with a child under five spend an average of 65 hours a week on basic childcare tasks, while men spend about 20. Even if women want to spend a lot of time with their children, the 65 hours leaves them exhausted. That is not equality!

On the other hand, more working-class men face similar rotten circumstances: low pay, job insecurity, part-time contracts. And different rotten circumstances. A young working-class black man living in the inner city who may never find work is not economically privileged. Working-class women face a whole raft of problems which are common to both men and women.

Capitalist propaganda often attempts to show *general* progress in society by referring to progress for *particular* individuals. A lot of women have done very well indeed — 32.9% of all managers are now women. They tell us all women can get to this position — with the right attitude. This is rubbish. Women at the bottom of the heap do not feel "averagely" better off because some have done well.

There is a lot of inequality *between women*, between, say, the nanny who earns £1.50 a hour looking after a child and its mother who earns maybe 15 or 20 times that amount, who rushes off to power breakfast at 6.30 in the morning and doesn't even have to pause to give the offspring a quality kiss good-bye because she lives with the comforting knowledge that the child has constant access to super-exploited professional love. This is sisterhood?

Under capitalism, women have undertaken waged work in various different ways at different times. As in all class societies, this has been structured by a sexual division of labour. Historically, the sexual division of labour, centred on the household and the family, generated and perpetuated sexual inequality and with very few exceptions, women's waged labour was lower-paid than men's. That remains true, but not without very real contradictory developments. I would argue that, outside of the home where women still do

most of the work, there has been a "levelling down" between men and women — some men are being "super-exploited" too!

The question of equality for women is inextricably, and centrally, bound up with the issues I have written about here. Women cannot be equal unless there are no barriers of discrimination to their participation in the labour force. Many other areas where equality can and must be won flow from this. For instance, progress in this area has pushed forward the equal treatment of girls in school. Young women now outstrip men when they leave school. They have more qualifications including in maths and science. Until the barriers have come right down women will not have all the choices they deserve including, if they want, the right to look after their children full-time during the early years without suffering hardship.

Women's participation in waged work gives women, potentially at least, a greater expectation of equality. This expectation is what socialists must relate to. However, the labour movement, whilst pays lip service to the cause of women's rights, does very little to *mobilise* around the problems women face. What sort of fight do we need?

Low pay for women must in the first place be fought by a struggle against low pay for *all* workers — by fighting for the minimum wage for example. Agitation for a general minimum wage should not stop us from using aspects of Equal Pay legislation: it is now, technically, possible to win equal pay for work of equal value. We are still in favour of a levelling up between men and women.

The labour movement's weakness on these issues is part of a pattern of passivity in the face of a systematic offensive against our class and a mood of defeat. Although the structures for organising women in the labour movement are in place (and have been for a long time), many of them remain quite irrelevant. Women's TUC conference, for instance, has no real debate, and is even more stitched up than the general conference.

In the future, if the labour movement is to rebuild, the issues that will be central are those that are also of primary importance to million of women workers. The same issues are affecting working-class men more and more.

The example of the kind of struggle that we need now and in the future is that still being fought by contract cleaners at Hillingdon hospital: women who had the courage to stand up to spiv bosses against all the odds, and say "we will not be your slaves".