

WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND SOCIALIST REVOLUTION

(Some notes towards a framework of discussion).

by J. Cunliffe.

Foreword

The text which follows is not, and makes no attempt to be a general analysis of sexual oppression as a whole. I am not one of those who believes that the proper place for analysis of gay oppression is in subsidiary or concluding passages in documents on women: that topic needs to be thoroughly analysed in its own right.

Nor is this document a programmatic offering, putting forward formulated slogans to aid campaign work on the various issues it touches upon. Certainly some of the problems described here stand in dire need of serious programmatic discussion by Marxists: what for instance do we concretely propose to do about the question of violence against women in general - or, most difficult of all, violence in the home? I think discussion must get under way on these questions: but it would be most productive if this took place within an agreed framework as to how we view the struggle for women's liberation in relation to the fight for socialist revolution. Since there has been no discussion on this latter point in any organised way since the fusion, it would seem to be high time the process was begun. Hence this text.

Comrades reading this will be disappointed if they are searching for high-flown theoretical pronouncements. I have never been a fan of convoluted terminology, and in any event I feel that the issues have been artificially complicated and confused of late: my view is that the development of Marxist theory to grasp the basic elements of women's oppression is a relatively straightforward business: I will look forward to reading any attempts to prove me wrong on this.

It seems particularly pointless for me to apologise for being a man writing the first substantial discussion document on women for the fused movement. The fact is that somebody had to stick their neck out and start the discussion going. Perhaps in the interests of stimulating the maximum debate it is better that it is begun by a man: hopefully other men will recognise that they too have a responsibility in developing the movement's understanding of women's oppression and its work towards women's liberation.

And perhaps also the setting out of a framework as to how women's oppression should be viewed as a whole can help lay to rest once and for all the crazily, wildly (an occasionally wilfully) distorted characterisation of the old WSL's position on women as "economist". On the other hand, that hoary old myth has been so firmly implanted in the thinking of some comrades that it will probably take more than a document on women's oppression to kill it off!

C. 16/9/82

From the Cradle to the Grave

The daily lives, the very existence of the majority of the entire population of the world is shaped and determined by the fact that they are sexually oppressed. From the cradle to the grave the status of every woman, no matter to which social class she may belong, is subordinate to that of men. No matter how brutally repressed and exploited he may be, even the most downtrodden man knows he can assert power and authority over at least some women - if only his wife, mother, daughters. The level of oppression suffered by proletarian women is heaped on top of the oppression and exploitation they suffer as members of the working class, and makes their very emergence into the organised labour movement and political life a major struggle.

2)

Without a grasp of this overwhelming material reality of oppression, Marxists will not successfully reach out to mobilise a revolutionary mass movement of women. And without such a movement we must recognise that even the most militant actions by sections of industrial workers, even the most determined strikes and street demonstrations will fail to lead into the vast, multi-sided social movement that is needed to overthrow capitalism and bring to power a genuinely revolutionary government. Marxist work to organise, mobilise and build revolutionary leadership amongst women is not simply "important" or "very important"; it is not a moral question or a test of the purity and good intentions of the male comrades; it is ABSOLUTELY VITAL if we are to build a revolutionary movement capable of actually producing a revolution.

In approaching this question therefore it is useful to begin by examining why it is that we must understand the role of women as not simply the most militant and combative elements in the present-day labour movement (which they have plainly been in recent years), but as a section of the working class which suffers specific and special oppression which must be addressed by Marxists.

Material Foundations of Women's Oppression

Although many of the forms taken by this oppression appear to consist of prejudices, attitudes, thoughts in the heads of men and women, it would be profoundly mistaken to approach sexual oppression as purely or even primarily an ideological question. As materialists we must recognise that the ideology of women's oppression, their subordination to men arises - like all other ideology - from a material foundation. In this case the foundation is the centuries-old separation between domestic labour in the home and social labour in the production process.

Exactly when and how this separation took place is not the subject of this document - and could be the subject for several books. Marxists have traditionally differentiated between the earliest forms of society (the stage of "primitive communism", in which the production of basic necessities was at such a rudimentary level as to require full and equal participation by both men and women to ensure subsistence) and the emergence of more advanced societies, in which the growing productivity of human labour, the emergence of new skills and crafts, brought a division of labour and the increasing creation of a surplus, above subsistence level, on which basis it became possible for the first time for individuals to live not by working themselves but by exploiting the more productive work of others.

Engels traces the origin of the separation of domestic and social labour back to this period of transition. The exploitation of one human by another runs alongside the emergence of private in distinction to communal property, and thus also the emergence of the first forms of class society. Disadvantaged by the repeated and uncontrolled burden of childbirth, and thereby increasingly excluded from the more developed skills and crafts of the emerging social order, women suffered a change in status, becoming increasingly subordinate to men. And, as part of the perpetuation of property rights and class divisions, the patriarchal family emerged as the institution by which responsibility for the "unproductive" members of society - the young and the very old - was transferred from society as a whole to individual, identifiable groups or individuals. *

*FOOTNOTE: Since Engels' time there has been extensive debate over the anthropological data upon which his theory of the "historic downfall of the female sex" is based. Subsequent work has been done which points in various possible directions. Radical feminists in particular have delved into such early history in order to "prove" that sexual oppression is not a class question or one which arose at a certain ...

3)

The Role of the Family

The growth of exploitative social systems brought increasing exploitation of women by men. As a source of unpaid domestic labour, sexual favours and future offspring, women came to be regarded as a form of property, to be owned, sometimes sold, and monopolised by men. The patriarchal family has thus always been a system of the more or less explicit enslavement of women to men. Indeed even the word "family" arises from the Latin word "famulus", meaning household slave, and "familia", meaning the group of slaves owned by one man.

Since these early stages of development, the form of the family unit has changed - evolving in line with the various requirements of successive prevailing social and economic systems. The family system under pre-capitalist societies was in many ways quite different from the family unit promoted by the advanced capitalist societies today.

Indeed the family structure itself serves a different function for the exploiting classes of society - for whom it is in essence a means of preserving and securing their property rights through inheritance, a means of perpetuating social decisions, and a means of dividing the exploited - from the function it serves amongst the working classes. For the proletariat, the family unit, far from being a means of passing on property rights, is the only place most people can turn to satisfy some of their basic human needs for love and companionship.

But this must not obscure the fact that it is in the age-old exclusion of women from the mainstream of "productive" labour, their widespread confinement to an existence of domestic labour and childrearing - epitomised and perpetuated in the family unit - that the ideology and material reality of women's oppression is rooted.

The atomisation of the working class brought about by the family unit is such that even the much-heralded "break-up of the family" (by which the pundits mean the rising rate of divorce and the growing number of single-parent families) brings not a fundamentally different or liberating structure, but simply smaller, more fragmented and often more oppressed and oppressive family units.

Modern capitalist society has seen the development of a material possibility to end these forms of oppression. Progress in the technology of contraception (though much remains to be done) and abortion could even now potentially eliminate the uncontrolled burden of childbirth. Modern machinery and techniques could provide social fac-

FOOTNOTE (cont'd): moment in history, but is rather a permanent war of the sexes completely independent of the class struggle.

Yet the answer to such politics in my view lies not in obscure archeological expeditions or the insistence in dogmatic fashion upon the literal existence of some primaeval "golden age" of sexual equality (indeed who did the "cavework" even then?): the answer must lie in the concrete analysis of the material basis of women's oppression and the ideology of inequality. The liberation of women is not a return to some former condition, but a step forward for society, made possible by the material wealth and the technology developed during the course of human history, and by the possibility of mobilising the social forces that can topple the existing social structures.

It is of course more comforting to believe that there is evidence of a time when women were equal - or even the dominant sex in long-lost matriarchal societies: but the most important thing for us is to offer a perspective for liberation in the period yet to come. For that, only revolutionary socialist politics will suffice.