

WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND SOCIALIST REVOLUTION

(Some notes towards a framework of discussion).

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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

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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.

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 ...

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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

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.

ilities to eliminate much of the drudgery of domestic labour - catering and laundry. Massive increases in industrial productivity (currently used to lengthen the dole queues) and the actual or potential wealth of society provides a more than sufficient labour force to offer social provision of childcare and professional help for the old and the sick.

Abiding features of women's oppression.

Yet reality is very different. Women's oppression still centres on the same issues which were central to their subordination to men in the earliest class societies. What are the main features of this oppression today?

1) The vast bulk of all domestic labour - "housework" - on a world scale is still the exclusive burden of women. As Lenin pointed out in post-revolutionary Russia, even formal equality of women before the law does not eliminate this oppression:

"You all know that even with the fullest equality, women are still in a position of inferiority because all house work is thrust upon them. Most of this house work is highly unproductive, most barbarous, most arduous, and it is performed by women. This labour is extremely petty and contains nothing that would in the slightest degree facilitate the development of women".

Lenin at least takes issue with those men who revel in the illusion that housework is some kind of soft option to factory work. But Lenin also understates the case. The fact is that because the entire life of a woman is seen as performing such "barbarous" and soul-destroying mindless work, the vast majority of women are denied access - and conditioned from their earliest years to feel unworthy of the educational and other facilities which would enable them to develop on an equal footing with men.

It is not simply doing domestic labour which in itself oppresses women - though that may seem intolerable enough to those who have experienced it: - it is the fact that women's whole lives are carved out as a process of schooling and conditioning them for a life of nothing but domestic labour. No other future is even remotely offered to most women. It is seen by all as their ordained destiny to slave in the service of a man, of her own children, of sick or elderly parents; or to carry out jobs for the state or private firms which are purely an extension of domestic labour.

Of course within the individual home the dual role of the family - as the unit of oppression and exploitation of women and at the same time the only source of love and companionship for most working people - emerges in full clarity.

The mindless toil of housework, the numbing routine and pettiness of cooking cleaning shopping and in every way servicing other members of the family are invested with their own special mystique: it is seen as the way in which a woman can express her love and devotion to her man and her kids. What by any standards is the most menial and exhausting manual labour which would be rejected out of hand as a paid job is accepted - often almost willingly - as a "labour of love".

2) Related to this is the fact that women almost exclusively shoulder the burden of full responsibility for every aspect of childcare and child-rearing. Of course some prosperous bourgeois and petty bourgeois women can afford to pay working class women to look after their children. But the whole question of child-rearing, from changing nappies to instilling a sense of subordination to the (male) head of the family and the various components of the state, falls in the first instance upon women, while fathers enjoy a relative freedom from any daily responsibility in the home.

It is all too easy for men, or even women without children, to underestimate the massive change forced upon a woman by the birth of

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her first child. Her life to all intents and purposes ceases to be her own. While the father will swiftly resume (or never break) the continuity of his daily routine, the women's first concern becomes the welfare and upkeep of the child. Periods of thought and concentration are overlaid or interrupted by a string of demands and worries. Intellectual development often grinds to a halt. Social life is disrupted. Only years later, with children packed off to work or college do many mothers fully reemerge into the world outside her home: indeed many never do.

3) Because domestic labour and childcare - often lasting the whole of the waking day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year - is not directly related to economic production in factories and workplaces it is seen as somehow "inferior" to the wage-labour of men. Women in the home remain economically subordinate, dependent upon the income brought into the household by the man, or upon payments from the state. This in turn reinforces the notion that the real work which women do (work which behind the scenes services and continuously reproduces the human resources vital for social production) is somehow unimportant or non-productive. By extension, where such work is performed by women for wages - cleaning cooking, caring for children, the sick or the old - it enjoys the lowest status as employment, the lowest wages and the worst conditions. Since most women come out of the educational system qualified only to carry out such traditional low-paid "women's work", it is small wonder that women in employment remain appallingly low paid in comparison to men.

4) The notion that, as unpaid domestic servant, the proper place of women is in the home means also that the wholesale exclusion of women from the workforce by social spending cuts and other aspects of the recession is largely concealed or ignored by official statistics and surveys. Evidence of women's unemployment is obscured by their legal and economic dependence on men which deprives them not only of benefits in their own right but even of the opportunity to appear among the figures of the unemployed. And this is worsened by the fact that under pressure of domestic responsibilities large numbers of women have worked only part time jobs, which have been axed in large numbers (with scarcely a whisper of protest from the leaders of the labour movement).

5) The rendering of women's unemployment "invisible" is only one of the ways in which women are discriminated against by the state and by the law. In general the legal status of women remains that of appendages to men; single mothers in particular face a battery of state-imposed means tests and restrictions. Marriage laws, tax legislation, restrictions on divorce - and of course restrictions on abortion - discriminate heavily against women.

6) Within this legal and domestic framework, women fall victim also to special oppression in the form of sexual violence. This ranges from assaults in the workplace (sexual harassment, or outright sexual exploitation by employers) through violent attacks on the street to assault and violence in the home itself.

The particular horror of sexual violence, and the frequent if not continuous implicit or explicit threat of such violence is of course entirely unknown to men: yet it colours, restricts or makes misery of the lives of millions of women.

In no other area of the law is the victim blamed for the violence of the aggressor or stigmatised as a victim. Yet in rape cases and a whole range of sexual attacks the alleged "provocative" behaviour of the victim is most frequently blamed, while it is the victims of rape or incest who carry the social disgrace of the crime. Nor is there safety in the home. Rapists often strike at the home of the victim, whilst wife-beating is a crime which in the vast majority of instances never reaches the stage of prosecution or investigation -

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since the wife is regarded for legal purposes as an article of property which the man is as free to kick around as a chest of drawers or a dog.

The continuing rise in the statistics of violent crime against women - despite the immense deterrents against reporting such crimes to the police shows in graphic terms the worsening plight of women in a decaying capitalist society.

7) The institution of the monogamous, patriarchal family, coupled with discriminatory rules applied by the DHSS and the pressures created by economic dependence upon a man and the non-stop tide of bourgeois "moral" propaganda and restrictions on abortion and contraception combine to drastically restrict a woman's free development of sexuality. For lesbian women there is additionally the heavy weight of heterosexist ideology to be combatted if they are to break from the "normal" family unit and establish relationships which fly in the face of established bourgeois prejudices.

Obviously much more could be written of the dual standards of "morality" which are applied to men as against women, thus permitting men far greater sexual freedom.

8) A further obvious material element of women's oppression is the torrent of mass media output which almost without exception accepts, justifies, or even glorifies women's subordinate position to men in society, buttressing the most backward and chauvinist prejudices of men, reinforcing the lack of self-confidence and feeling of inferiority with which women are conditioned from childhood, and asserting the (almost entirely fictional) "norms" of the patriarchal "nuclear family" unit.

Not so obvious, but equally real in the oppression of women is the way in which - as Dale Spender's work has shown - the whole structure of language and expression, the whole of publicly-produced consciousness, is shaped and determined by men, from the male point of view. Any attempt to express the experiences and feelings of women run slap into a major obstacle in the lack of any suitable vocabulary, and the fact that in every means of expression, the male is the "norm".

9) Small wonder under the physical, emotional, economic and social pressures of their daily lives women in the home fall prey to stress-related illnesses, in particular to clinical depression. In their various and special needs for health care, women run again into conflict with a male-dominated medical hierarchy, and fall as first victims to the various waves of state spending cuts.

Marxist movement's weaknesses

To add political insult to these material injuries suffered by women, these aspects of their oppression have not only been ignored or upheld by the main reformist bureaucracies but have also been largely ignored by the Marxist movement. Though many of the issues have been singly - and in most cases belatedly and in token fashion - recognised by Marxists, they have not been assembled together for detailed analysis or taken seriously as an issue. Though early Marxists and others have been willing and in some cases eager to organise women workers as militant fighters in the working class, they have paid little or no attention to examining, explaining or confronting their oppression as women over and above their position as workers. Partly as a result of this the Marxist movement has signally failed to solve the problems of reaching and mobilising women in the home as a component of the mass struggle against capitalism.

There are many reasons for this. One is that the leadership of

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the Marxist movement has emerged of course not from a social vacuum but out of the components of bourgeois society itself, reflecting, insofar as no conscious struggle is taken up for political development, the existing bourgeois ideology.

Thus we see that the leadership of the revolutionary movement has always been heavily male dominated, and as such preoccupied with "men's" political issues - the organisation and mobilisation of the industrial proletariat, and related political questions. The exceptions to this have been where strong-willed revolutionary women such as Zetkin and Kollontai have battled within the revolutionary movement for the question of women to be taken seriously and been able to make some (usually short-lived) impression upon the male leaders.

But in the case of the Bolsheviks, the real gains that were made on this front were certainly short-lived. The bureaucratisation of the Soviet workers' state ran hand-in-hand with the restoration by the bureaucracy of conservative moral and social structures. The Stalinisation of CPs around the world walled off any emergent radicalised Marxist women. Since then the ever-closer working relationships between the Stalinist parties and the bourgeois order (in particular the reformist union leaderships) have prevented the CPs playing any progressive role in developing the struggle for women's liberation. Instead, Stalinist parties have tail-ended the petty bourgeois and bourgeois wings of the post-war women's movements, responding to their confused class politics and offering ready-made formulae for popular fronts and class collaboration.

We have yet to see therefore a serious effort by male leaders of the Marxist movement to come to terms with the significance of those struggles in which women play a key role, and the need to allocate resources to work designed to organise and mobilise women in the home. It is up to us to break this new ground.

More than Capitalism

The fact is that none of the special elements of oppression outlined above can be explained away as simply the product of capitalism and its system of exploitation - though all of them have become so intertwined and inextricably linked with that system that none can be seriously tackled without its overthrow.

Capitalism has adapted and developed the family systems which had emerged in pre-capitalist society. Certainly capitalism prospers from the unpaid domestic labour performed in the family home, which minimises the expenditure needed to maintain and reproduce an exploitable workforce. To provide social facilities for catering, laundry, child-care, etc and adequate facilities to deal with the sick and the old, would involve colossal state expenditure which would cut the rate of profit in capitalist industry.

But from the capitalists' point of view, whether domestic labour is physically performed by men or women is of only incidental interest, so long as he pays nothing for it. Whether his workforce is made up of men or women is not in itself an issue - so long as the "hands" can be forced to work at suitable levels of exploitation. Indeed in many circumstances it is more profitable to exploit women than men.

So it is not the economic laws of capitalism as such which demand that women rather than men should shoulder the burden of domestic labour: indeed the earlier phases of capitalist production and capitalist economies in many semi-colonial countries today have relied heavily upon the exploitation of female and child labour - often simultaneously with heavy rates of male unemployment. (Though it is fair to say that nowhere in the world does this take place without the women in effect doing the 'double shift' of full time work followed by domestic labour).

Yet time and time again the development of the first trade unions

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and labour movement organisations has seen men take steps at first to exclude women and youth from the workforce sooner than organise them. Echoing the ideology of the ruling classes throughout history, the spontaneous organisations created by the proletariat have enshrined the subordination of women. And the emergence within such unions of a conservative bureaucracy, resting on the most privileged layers of skilled and securely-employed workers, served only to consolidate this tendency. Sexist prejudice was additionally entrenched by the partial successes that were won in the early struggles for reform. The protective legislation which excluded women and youth from whole sections of the industrial workforce, coupled with the gradual establishment of the higher "family wage" for male workers, drove a major new wedge between proletarian men and women.

The notion of a woman's place being in the home was doubly reinforced, while the minimal status attached to their labour - and to domestic labour in particular - was underlined. For the more privileged sections of male workers, the "ownership" of a non-wage working wife became seen as part of their standard of living. (It is partly against such a background of division that we must set Engels' notion that proletarian women could achieve equality through their entry in large numbers into the industrial workforce which would break down their economic dependence. Bitter experience of women increasingly involved in the industrial workforce in the century that has followed shows that there is much more to women's liberation than securing an independent pay packet.)

For the capitalist class, protective legislation had two advantages. On the one hand, it did prevent the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation reaching the level at which the longer-term renewal of future generations of workers would be put at risk by rising mortality rates; on the other hand, by placating the demands of the most organised and vocal sections - the skilled male workers - the capitalists were able to foster a certain social stability along lines of "divide and rule".

By common consent of the ruling class and working class men, the role of working class women in society was to be subordinate to that of the men to whom - in class terms - they were apparently "equal." The proletariat, the propertyless class under capitalism, was to be divided along sexual lines, with the male wage earner established as the "bourgeois" and his wife, toiling in the home for no economic reward, servicing the labour force of the capitalists, becoming the doubly oppressed "proletarian".

The precise form of this structure has changed and evolved even during the development of capitalism itself. In two World Wars, capitalists have been prepared to reverse the process of isolation of women in the home and, in order to exploit new opportunities for profitable war production, to draw women wholesale into the factories and other sanctified "male" preserves. In each case however the post-war period has seen a blitz of propaganda and the closure of childcare and other facilities in measures to expel women once again from these sectors of employment and restore the "normal" relationships of subordination. The period since WW2 in particular has seen this effort backed up in Britain by the development of a "welfare state" structure which - far from replacing domestic toil and the family unit by social provision - sets out to reinforce the family structure and the bonds which tie the woman first and foremost to domestic labour and to sole responsibility for children,

Women lead the fight for change

The progressive changes which have taken place in women's status - the winning of the vote, their emergence as a force in the organised labour movement, the pressure for legal reforms on equal pay and

opportunity - have arisen not as a result of the foresight of "enlightened" men, but as the outcome of bitter struggles spearheaded by women themselves, in conflict with the existing leaderships of the labour movement as well as the institutions of the capitalist state.

In particular the rise of the women's liberation movement in the post-war period can be seen to stem from the growing self-confidence among women who in the period of the economic "boom" had become an increasingly numerous and important element in the capitalists' workforce and in the apparatus of the public services; they had for the same reason begun to acquire greater educational opportunities and thus further self-confidence and frustration at their unequal treatment; and as a result of technological development they found themselves increasingly able to control that factor which had for millennia reinforced women's subordination to men - their fertility.

Yet the conservatism and male domination of the established organisations of the labour movement (including in this respect most of the "revolutionary left") has meant that despite major battles for equal pay (Fords, Trico, etc) the momentum of the struggle for women's liberation has yet to find much more than muted tokenistic echo in the trade unions; and partly for this reason, while many of the basic notions of women's liberation have become widely accepted among educated middle class women, they have yet to reach working class women - let alone working class men!

Men benefit from women's oppression

For proletarian women, oppression is neither an abstraction nor simply oppression by "the system"; nor is it felt as a dead weight of ideology. It is a material fact which shapes their very lives - and which is to a large degree felt most directly in the way they are treated each day not by the capitalists so much as by men, working class men.

No analysis of women's oppression is adequate if it fails to recognise that men benefit in material ways from the subordination of women. Working class men can in general grow up schooled to expect a life free from any obligation to do domestic labour, and free from any responsibility for childcare or childrearing. (They may of course decide to do such things - often on an odd occasion playing with a child or even a bit of washing up can be seen as fun, or something that makes them feel good: but the primary responsibility for feeding, clothing, washing, health care and every aspect of caring for children falls upon the woman of the house).

We need not here go into detail of the ways in which working class men materially benefit from the unpaid services rendered by their mothers, their wives and their daughters: a hard-bitten insurance company some time ago valued the services of an average wife in excess of £200 per week.

We need not go into detail on the ways in which working class men - in the home, in the workplace, in clubs, pubs and on the street, - act further to consolidate the subordination of their women and of women in general.

But we need to recognise that these are facts, and that any attempt to smooth them away, or ignore this very real division within the working class itself can only leave us with an inadequate grasp of women's oppression and the task before us in ending it.

Women's Oppression and Class Interests.

Are we to conclude therefore that women's oppression originates among working class men? Is it the case that, conscious of the material advantages to them of the subordination of women, proletarian men have pressurised the capitalist class into developing a complex super-

structure to preserve that subordination?

Or, as materialists who recognise that it is "being" - material conditions - which determines consciousness, and that the dominant ideology in society is the ideology of the dominant class, should we not look instead for the ~~function~~ of sexism to the capitalist class, its ideology and its institutions?

For, powerful as are custom and practice in shaping the everyday thinking of the oppressed classes in society, they only become custom and practice over decades and centuries insofar as they conform to the basic needs of the ruling class - and are thus fostered or tolerated.

In fact all of the prejudices and practices of working class men in relation to women are reinforced and regenerated from above by the capitalist class. It is the policies of generations of employers which have segregated women into "women's jobs" at discriminatory rates of pay and with reduced social status. (The notion of "women's jobs" - and which jobs are appropriate varies widely: in the USSR for instance, women make up a majority of unskilled industrial manual labour - for instance in the construction industry - and the large numbers of women doctors is explained by the relatively low pay and status attached to that profession).

It is legislation by the capitalist state apparatus which has enshrined women's oppression in a complex web of restrictions and requirements upon women, prescribing sexist "norms" and outlawing behaviour which challenges such norms.

It is the educational system run by the same capitalist class which, together with the family unit, undertakes the task of socialising girls to act in later life as subordinate women, while training boys to grow up as dominant, chauvinist men.

And it is the capitalist mass media - and especially the most self-conscious of the media, the advertising industry - which constantly seek ways of repackaging the sexist stereotypes and values of the family unit, of women's subordination, to win support for such oppression among the oppressed themselves and limit any tendencies towards self-assertion.

Profits from Oppression

Indeed while life is made materially more comfortable for proletarian men by the oppression of women, it is the men of the ruling class who literally profit from the sexual division of the working class. Employers in textiles, foods, catering, light engineering and a host of industries cream off super-profits from the low ages and sweated labour of women workers denied the strength of union organisation or the status of "male" jobs. Part-time jobs in particular draw in married women receiving the lowest wages, denied the benefits and conditions offered to male or full time workers, and offering employers the easiest means of expanding or pruning back a workforce at short notice and minimal cost.

If working class women at work provide a direct source of profit for the capitalists, those denied a job and confined to the home offer an additional indirect source of exploitation by servicing and reproducing the workforce at minimal cost to the capitalist state. Successive waves of cutbacks in public services have shown the burden of such labour falling still more heavily upon women in the home.

For substantial sections of capital it is precisely the individual home and family unit which offers a lucrative market for consumer goods. Electrical and engineering firms rely upon the household market, with families buying (and leaving idle 6 days a week) millions of washing machines, electric mixers, etc, rather than allowing the rational organisation of communal laundry facilities, restaurants, etc, which could free women from the confines of the home.

Other sections of capital go even further, and trade directly upon the peddling of sexual stereotypes - cosmetics, fashions, children's toys, etc - not forgetting the highly lucrative pornography industry.

Divide and Rule

Over and above these economic profits accruing to capital from the institutions of women's oppression there remains the strategic importance of sexual divisions in the working class. Just as it has become commonplace to recognise the value to capitalism of racial and national divisions as a means of exploiting the backwardness of certain layers of the working class and impeding united class action, so we should firmly grasp the importance of the "family unit" and the sexual division of the working class. In the isolation of the home the worker becomes the ideal target for ruling class propaganda pumped out by the mass media - and increasingly the employers have recognised the usefulness of this by adopting the technique of the postal ballot. But in addition the double isolation of many working class women - denied a job in their own right and confined to stultifying domestic surroundings - means that they can on occasion be utilised by the capitalists as a means of piling additional pressure on male workers to hold back from or abandon strike action. Conversely, the conservative pressures of husbands in the home can often be effectively brought to bear against women workers who come forward in militant trade union struggles.

In this whole structure, to which sexual oppression is a key component, the attitude of the labour bureaucracy reflects both their accommodation to the capitalist class and to the backwardness of the most privileged layers of the working class. Under these pressures the bureaucracy acts consistently to exclude or marginalise the most oppressed - youth, black workers, the unemployed and women - and when these forces do force their way in to the unions, they try to contain them in a passive role.

This unholy alliance of bosses and bureaucrats wields substantial material forces for shaping the thoughts and attitudes of both male and female workers in work and out of work, in the unions, in political activity and in the home.

Revolution the Key to Liberation

What then is the basis on which we could hope to fundamentally change this situation, alter the thinking of both male and female workers to create conditions to break down the practices and institutions of male domination and sexual oppression? How can men be brought to renounce their present position of privilege? How can the divisive and oppressive family unit be replaced with a new and satisfactory social structure which will be accepted as a step forward?

To bring about such a root-and-branch shake-up of society and its institutions a vast material change is needed which will disrupt the established thoughts, prejudices and customs of centuries. Nothing short of a revolutionary change is needed in the ownership and control of the means of production, to smash the existing machinery of the state and take from the hands of the capitalists the control over the institutions which perpetuate the ideology of capitalism.

In this respect the struggle for women's liberation while not being synonymous with the struggle for socialism, must in capitalist societies start off on the same path and confront the same initial bulwarks of established power and authority, while needing to go on beyond the seizure of power by the working class in order to establish a society in which the new possibilities of social production the development of technology and planning are in fact utilised to establish sexual equality.

Reformism and Feminism

The problem of the powerful & possibly even growing - influence of reformist politics in the movement for women's liberation flows at least in part from the sheer scale and diversity of the forms of women's oppression - few of which are in themselves so fundamental to capitalist stability that they cannot be at least ameliorated in response to concerted pressure campaigns. There is thus wide scope for agitation on real issues which can offer real, though very partial improvements even within the existing system.

Thus we have seen capitalist governments carrying legislation on equal pay, equal opportunity, and lifting various elements of legal discrimination of women: capitalism still stands. We have also seen pressure campaigns bring cosmetic changes in educational courses available for young women, and token recognition of the need to combat too blatant a form of sexual stereotyping in education. An increasingly vocal women's movement has highlighted sexism in the media, to some limited effect.

With a labour movement rife with the most entrenched sexist leadership, and growing layers of women arising as the most militant and volatile sections of the working class, there have been struggles in the unions and Labour Party for women's voices to be heard.

And vitally important campaigns and struggles have been waged which grasp the nettle of the most fundamental demand for the liberation of most women from the shackles which keep them from political and social life - the struggle for free and adequate child care facilities. Struggles around nursery closures and for the expansion of nursery facilities have underlined how vital is this issue - without which any amount of "equal rights" legislation is little more than a charade.

We favour such campaigns; we favour all of the reforms they have been able to secure. As revolutionaries we must recognise the importance of such struggles in mobilising and asserting the political strength and demands of women, and lend our weight to those involved in the fight. We do so however not from a reformist but from a revolutionary standpoint. We recognise that none of these struggles in themselves are going completely to eliminate even that particular element of women's oppression on which they are focussed - since that oppression is bolstered in so many ways by the institutions of the capitalist state. Women's oppression is not some superficial flaw in capitalism that can be erased through pressure and protest. To end it requires the destruction of the old structures lock stock and barrel, a total change in the thinking and daily behaviour of the vast majority of the population. It is from this standpoint that we must link our agitation on women's oppression firmly to the necessity for a revolutionary proletarian party which alone can lead the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism.

And from the same standpoint we must fight within our own movement to ensure that it champions the struggles of women at every level, bringing forward women into membership and leadership of the WSL, and developing a thoroughgoing programme for women's liberation into our programme for socialist revolution.

Marxists and Women's Oppression

A genuine revolutionary orientation to women's oppression does not call upon women to forget their own immediate oppression and problems as women. Indeed with many working class women with whom we make contact, part of our political task is to make them aware of the ways in which they are oppressed as women, explaining to them why this is the case, and persuading them of the need to fight such oppression.

We do not tell women simply to fight for socialism expecting that the socialist revolution in itself would or could immediately and

automatically resolve the problems of sexual oppression. Rather we must show how the mobilisation of women against sexual oppression is an essential component of the mass social movement required to bring about socialist revolution - and that only once state power is in the hands of a class which has no economic interest in sexual oppression, and which has no established and fixed conservative social order to defend, can conditions be created for the wholesale changes that are needed. We must set out as an organisation to give our women members and women contacts the confidence and organisational means to fight seriously in every arena for their needs and demands. We need to ensure that such ~~w~~ questions are taken seriously by all our members, and fought for with energy in the existing labour movement.

Women who take up the banner of struggle for their own liberation need not bland phrases from Marxists but practical evidence that Marxists are committed in practice to their struggles, and fighting to mobilise others - male and female - in their support.

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SECTION 2: WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

Special Methods of Work

Women are specially oppressed; they face special difficulties. Marxists must recognise the need for special methods of agitational work if we are to mobilise women and win them to revolutionary politics. Such methods must begin from the fact that in society as a whole women are largely excluded from political life, oppressed and isolated in the home, and schooled in subordination and submission to men. As such, many women accept, even expect to be treated in sexist fashion, and thus tend to lack sufficient self-confidence to fight politically in "male" preserves such as union branches or the Labour Party. This is compounded by the organisational forms and norms which have kept even unionised women largely isolated from branch meetings and leading committees, and which have ensured that the ~~x~~ militancy of women workers has been blocked at each turn by a cynical and manipulative (male) bureaucracy.

The case for special methods of work and organisation among women was made by the Comintern - though the precise forms it prescribed and the level of its analysis of women's oppression appear very dated today. The necessity to combat sexual prejudice among male communists was referred to only in passing, and the Bolsheviks themselves - despite definite notable exceptions - reflected many of the problems of developing a substantial number of women into leading positions. Though some of Trotsky's writings in the 1920s and 1930s show an increased awareness of the dimensions of women's oppression in the increasingly bureaucratised Soviet state, the 1938 Transitional Programme contains only a cursory and patently inadequate (not to say sexist and patronising) reference to the role of women in the revolutionary struggle.

But since WW2 the emergence of a mass spontaneous movement for women's liberation outside of and largely despite the Marxist movement has underlined again the need for flexible and special forms of work to enable Communists to relate to the struggles of women. Indeed though the feminist movement has its origins and most of its leadership in the middle classes, recent years have also seen women workers at the very forefront of industrial struggles - particularly in the public sector and in the fight to defend jobs, union rights and wages. This mass awakening of proletarian women demands also of revolutionaries a sensitive and specialised response to the problems these women face at the hands of their bureaucratic leaders.

The political awakening of women can also be seen in the

rapid growth and radicalisation of women's sections in the Labour Party. Unless we find ways to draw such women towards revolutionary politics, we will miss a major opportunity to strengthen the struggle against the Labour bureaucracy.

So what kind of orientation should our movement have towards women and the women's movement? We should combine direct political work in which the WSL argues its politics with women in struggle with the broader fight to group around ourselves a periphery of women who wish to organise and fight for their rights, with whom we can campaign jointly and discuss political issues.

In terms of direct approaches we must ensure that the WSL gives active support and political leadership to each and every trade union and economic struggle involving women workers, drawing the most militant layers of women into contact with us and seeking to win them to our programme of socialism and women's liberation. This by no means excludes, but should complement an active involvement in the whole range of wider campaigns and struggles waged by women against specific forms of sexual oppression.

Our overall objective must be to show women the need to organise themselves, and give them the political confidence and guidance to combat the labour bureaucrats, and to recognise the political limitations of pressure and protest. Our task is not to tell women to wait until men can be brought to agree with their demands, but to develop and strengthen their political fight, and help build campaigns which can force their way through the obstacle course of bureaucracy and male backwardness.

In such work we can show at each point the main material obstacles to the liberation of women - the capitalist state, its various structures, the material interests of the ruling class, and the conservative role of the labour bureaucrats. We can show how it is only Marxist theory which offers the key to understanding them, and the Marxist programme which offers a perspective of mobilising the forces needed to smash these obstacles.

While supporting and fighting for partial demands, we must also point towards the broader revolutionary solutions which are necessary, insisting that the key to fundamental change is mass working class action, in which the key component is that of working class women as the most oppressed and most radical elements of the proletariat.

We should commission a popularised explanation of women's oppression to be produced as a pamphlet - explaining its origins, nature, the mechanisms which perpetuate it, and our programme to fight it. We should use this to reach out to working class women largely left aside by the women's movement. Such a pamphlet would also be of value in combatting sexism among working class men, whose backwardness is a major barrier to the development of women in the labour movement.

Such an account requires of course a further development of Marxist theory to offer a fuller analysis of women's oppression - which can fill in the gaps in our understanding which have been revealed by the criticisms of the feminist movement.

Crisis in our work

What does this mean in practice for the WSL? There is at present an obvious problem in our work amongst women - a crisis of direction which is in my view due primarily to a weakness of leadership in the organisation as a whole (it would be a bit unreasonable to single out only work amongst women as the sole area of work in which there have been problems - though it is an acute and chronic case).

In fact both old movements obviously failed to develop a substantial leading cadre of women (witness the fact that we have only 3 out of 12 on our EC, and few on the NC). Progress has if anything been weaker on this front since fusion, as our movement has run into a major problem of training an expanded "middle layer" of branch and area leadership. Women who have made political development during the past year have done so largely in spite of the role of the OC/EC/NC rather than because of them. Theoretical work on women's oppression - occasionally talked about at various levels - has scarcely even begun. Our organising work, key to interventions in the struggles of working class women, has been in general badly inadequate - with a substantial failure of national leadership to devote sufficient resources to the St Mary's struggle, Lee Jeans, Rulecan and a succession of major battles.

These problems have been compounded by grossly inadequate and infrequent discussion of our work amongst women on both the OC (next to none) and the EC. Even when decisions have been taken by OC or EC, there has been little or no systematic follow-up, resulting in a complete failure to implement many decisions and even periods of simple paralysis of the work.

Higher Priority

We cannot resolve these problems without the WSL leading committees attaching a much higher priority to work amongst women, and to following the activity of our comrades involved in the work. Unless a lead comes from the EC - stepping up the momentum of its discussion of the work and monitoring the implementation of decisions - we cannot reasonably expect our branches to make the kind of development which is required of them - stepping up their work to reach the wide periphery of women now coming into activity.

Autonomous area of work?

It is understandable that in the face of such problems on our male dominated EC some women comrades should conclude that the answer is to give up on them and look instead for ways of making work amongst women effectively a self-governing province of the WSL.

I am firmly convinced that this would be profoundly damaging to the work itself, and to the cdes involved: and my position on this is not drawn solely from textbook Bolshevism and the Comintern, but also from a look at the implications.

1) It would play into the hands of those who now take a patronising view of women in our movement, and who basically regard "women's work" as unimportant enough for the women to be allowed to go off and "make their own mistakes". In fact women's struggles, like any others, need leadership, not benign tolerance.

2) To leave our women comrades without any organised mechanism for their work to be discussed and criticised is to open the door to the danger of disorientation. The work takes place under particularly heavy pressure from petty bourgeois feminism and from the reformists in the LP. I think we should be warned by the political break from Bolshevism by cde Khan - a long-time Trotskyist - and attempt to strengthen our comrades against such pressures.

3) To abandon any attempt to develop our male comrades to the point where they can follow and contribute to the work amongst women is a cop-out which must inhibit both men and women in the WSL. Men would be left to blunder on in ignorance, offending, ignoring or misleading women, while women comrades, ghettoised to "women's work", could never hope to establish a genuine overall political authority in the WSL. Far from increasing the authority of women, such a move would consolidate a rigid hierarchy in which women comrades would remain forever subordinate to men in the WSL.

4) The position of autonomy is divisive, since it could not help but provoke repeated and pointless conflicts between men and women

comrades at national area and branch level, since decisions on activity and priorities would be arrived at independently and in mutual ignorance.

5) But all this is not to deny that there should be some autonomy in the women's work: there should be as much autonomy as possible in the Broad Groups of women. This does not mean that WSL women should be silent within the groups or hand the leadership to anyone who turns up; it means that the main lines of our policy, decided by WSL bodies, should be argued for sensibly, flexibly and without ultimatums with non-members - just as we should do in union meetings and broad groups.

However it would seem from the present state of affairs that the present problem with the F Broad Group is not that we have too much but too little input and influence from the WSL. F remains a ramshackle and formless organisation with little continuity between conferences, and a paper largely devoid of WSL political positions except on the most rudimentary "support the NHS workers" level.

Broad Groups

Unless we take steps to raise the political level of F - incorporating more propaganda for socialism and revolution, offering more in the way of political leadership to the varied struggles in which we should be involved, retaining and developing the dialogue with the broader women's movement while seeking to make the paper more attractive to working class women - we will not in my view make the kind of connection we need to recruit the best forces drawn towards F into the WSL.

Unless we take steps to structure and expand our broader periphery into F groups and build upon the important turn to the unions made in the Spring TU conference, we could lose the campaigning momentum and fail to make the gains that should flow from this broader work.

The Women's Campaign for Jobs also offers opportunities which we have yet to make use of, particularly if linked to active work through Women's Sections to reach out to sections of unemployed women on the big estates.

In my view the problem is not the existence of the broad campaigns and groups, they are a vital tool in the fight: the problem is that like so many other things we do, it goes off at half-cock, and we fail to capitalise on the spadework we have done. The Broad Groups offer extremely exciting possibilities, IF THEY ARE ORGANISED AND BUILT, and IF WE SEE OUR TASK AS GIVING LEADERSHIP WITHIN THEM, rather than adapting to the level of those who come along.

Recruitment

With serious commitment from the leadership and the membership of the WSL, these problems can be overcome. Our target in my view should be substantially to boost the WSL's work amongst women, to recruit more women members, to increase the self-confidence and theoretical grounding of our women comrades, and from this to develop more women into positions of overall leadership in our party work. This means allocating increased resources - including close attention to childcare provision for parents in the movement to free them for political work. We should aim to increase the percentage of women in our organisation substantially towards the 50% level in the next 12 months.

Unless we do so, we are plainly out of touch with the most radical, oppressed and militant sections of the working class in both the unions and the Labour Party. And that, I'm sure we would all agree, is something that cannot be allowed.