

THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IS A CLASS QUESTION

We need a women's movement right now unlike anything we have built in the last ten years: a movement of millions of women, organized. A mass movement of women whose organization reaches into every office, sweatshop, household and high school to demand jobs, equal pay, adequate income, day care, the right to unionize, an end to every type of racial discrimination and equality for women. This is a turning point for the women's movement, when it could fall definitively to the elitist leadership of bourgeois women's organizations or be seized by revolutionary leadership and take root and flower among working-class women to become a mass movement. If the movement we build is anything less than this it perpetuates a false notion of women's liberation as the property of a small and precious group of women who hold the keys to liberation in their own minds and continually refine their ideas among themselves. Sometimes this is in the name of radical feminism, which holds out the reactionary hope of a return to a precapitalist golden age when women ruled. Sometimes it is even in the name of socialism. But no one can claim to be building a women's movement who doesn't ask herself this question, and honestly answer it: who am I organizing, and for what?

The conditions exist to build women's organizations: the depression is catapulting women into spontaneous action rooted in anger at the terrible crimes being committed against them and their families. Households headed by women represent the fastest-growing poverty group in America. A disproportionate number of women live on fixed incomes, social security or welfare, and are unable to get by, caught between rising prices and dwindling checks. Women work in lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs than men. Only one in eight women workers belongs to a union, and women are being laid off at a higher rate than men. The official unemployment rate among women climbed to 9.1% as of August. The number would be much higher if it included the approximately one million people, almost entirely women, who want a job now but aren't looking because of household responsibilities.

The ruling class is pushing down the standard of living of the working class -- the cost of labor power, what is socially understood to be the acceptable cost of feeding, housing and reproducing the worker and his or her family. This cost includes the indirectly paid, invisible labor of women in the home. Few working-class families can now get by on the "breadwinner's" pay alone. Some capitalists are opposing the very idea that the cost of a man's labor power includes his family -- why maintain a bunch of freeloaders? So women are feeling the bite of the economic crisis both on the job and in the home. Hundreds of general movements against the depression are springing up, from hospital workers to high school students. Women are participating in all of these, but no movement of women has yet grown up like the drives to organize the unorganized women during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Women were organized as domestic workers, laundry workers and hotel and restaurant workers, to improve working conditions and win some legal limitation of their exploitation. They organized boycotts against inflation and fought segregation. The CIO organizers of the 30s had the incalculable advantage of a proletarian communist party whose militants led the left labor movement. The development again of such a revolutionary party will be a necessary step toward the liberation of women.

The women's question is a class question. The subjugation of women arose along with exploitative class relationships, as the direct result of the development of private property. The family became the economic unit of society. From that point in human history women and women's work were considered outside the economic life of society and were held in contempt. Home and child-rearing became a private burden and doom rather than a valued form of social labor. Today in the US women are subject to a double exploitation: as 40% of the work force, and as housewives whose chores consume as much time today as they did one hundred years ago.

No doubt about it: only with the destruction of class society -- revolution -- and the building of socialism can women be free. The women's movement should take its stand with the working class, which will be the motor force in making this revolution.

The women's question is a class question; it does not hinge on some vague and mystical or biological sisterhood of everywoman. It hinges on class consciousness. No movement is above classes. The abortion movement of the last ten years is one example. Legal abortion was won, and this was a major victory. But the bourgeois leadership of the abortion movement never mobilized women for the right of all women to free, safe abortion with dignity and control over their choices. That remains a privilege of the few. What were the consequences of this failure? A Puerto Rican woman was killed in one of the first legal abortions in New York City. No connections were made to the movement to oppose imperialist use of wholesale sterilization and birth control experimentation in the Third World. Without agitation among working-class women about why women need the choice of abortion the reactionary right-to-life movement was able to grab hold of thousands of women's minds.

To base our organizations among working-class women -- who are, after all, the great majority of women -- we should become the fiercest fighters for improvement in the conditions of women's lives and concern ourselves intimately with the troubles of working-class women: of Black women, Native American women, Puertorriquenas, Chicanas, Asian women, white women. Of course, this women's movement would find allies among all sectors of women.

We start with a tremendous advantage: the consciousness of sexism which the women's movement has built over the last ten years. This consciousness of the particular nature of women's oppression in the workplaces and institutions of society, in US culture and in the minds of the people is our movement's particular contribution. These understandings are a way to reach millions of women with our commonality. We have to give a class content to this consciousness.

What we have only begun to do is make a concrete class analysis of the conditions of women in our society as the basis for an organizing strategy. This is indispensable. The tools of Marxist-Leninist ideology have to be grasped firmly by women organizers; without a working analysis we won't be able to make the leap history demands.

Some wrong ideas widely accepted by women activists are holding back the development of mass women's organizations based in the working class.

The biggest mistake women can make is to separate their movement from Black people and other Third World people oppressed by the US. This is true historically: in the 1840s the women's movement allied itself with the anti-slavery cause and grew, but after reconstruction the women's movement cut itself off from any possibility of fundamental change by accepting segregation and the practical reenslavement of Black people and turning to winning property rights for upper-class women.

Opportunist alliances with racism in the women's movement must be exposed and rejected. The ERA movement provides an example: in New York, instead of turning to the millions of Black and Puerto Rican women in the city for support, the ERA forces were overjoyed to find an ally in Rosemary Gunning, the Conservative Party Republican assemblywoman from Queens who has established herself as the main demagogue against busing and for white control of the NYC school system. In exchange for such a seemingly powerful and respectable ally the ERA leadership abdicated any chance of mobilizing the oppressed women of the city behind their case. Although the depth of sexism in the US was exposed by the reaction against the ERA, the total failure of that movement to defend the rights of oppressed women and to mobilize and link up with that revolutionary energy from the grass roots lies beneath its defeat.

Working alliances must be sought out with Third World women activists and organizations. White women have to examine their demands and programs and schools and newspapers: do they raise the questions and issues which concern Black women? Do they attack the criminal fact that 34% of women of childbearing age in Puerto Rico, a US colony, have been sterilized? If the women's movement is really organizing women, is active in communities and workplaces, it will find itself in the parts of this segregated society where Third World and white women meet, working with Black and Puerto Rican and Chicana women, whose national consciousness and militancy will push the women's movement forward. If we look at the most developed mass struggles which women are leading, Third World women are there: the battle for the schools, the welfare movement, the rank and file strikes at Farah and Oneita. This is our women's movement.

Another wrong idea is that men are the enemies of women. This is not true. Capitalism is women's enemy. While we struggle fiercely against all forms of sexist behavior and always fight to root it out from among the people, we want to build unity with all the people who are embattled against imperialism. Thinking of men as the enemy often takes the form of a kind of purism in practice -- a withdrawal from struggling with men. As soon as women engage themselves with the problems of working-class women they will find themselves working with men, opening some meetings to men, searching for alliances with all other parts of the left and working-class movement to win the necessary goals. This is common sense. Women don't live in a vacuum.

The idea that a women's movement doesn't have to take on the state and the bosses is the other idea which holds women back. This is a form of American exceptionalism, the idea that this revolution will be a revolution of consciousness. We are not just improving our understanding or uniting together or educating ourselves and liberating our creative energies in counter-institutions -- we are organizing a movement to overthrow the real enemies of women and reorganize society so that women's freedom can be seriously addressed at last. We must direct our movement against the ruling class and its agent imperialists. This is not a small matter. It is a matter of building class conscious women's organizations, teaching women who their real enemies are and participating in militant activity of all kinds to bring about a change. This is not only a matter of line but of practical work, of joining all the active struggles of women, of talking to groups of people who don't already accept the ideas of the women's movement. When our sisters are out on strike we should be on the picket line too. When the city closes a daycare center we should open it back up. Don't forget Mother Jones: "Whatever your fight, don't be ladylike!"

-- Celia Sojourn
for the Central Committee, WUO