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What is the Revolutionary

Potential of Women's Liberation ?



KATHY MCAFEE & MYRNA WOOD

BREAD AND ROSES

(A SONG)

AS we come marching, marching in the beauty of
the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts
gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden
sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses!
Bread and roses!"

AS we come marching, marching, we battle too for
men,
For they are women's children, and we mother
them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until
life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread,
but give us roses!

AS we come marching, marching, unnumbered women
dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient cry
for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging
spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for
roses, too.

AS we come marching, marching, we bring the
greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of
the race.
No more the drudge and idler—ten that toil where
one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses!
Bread and roses!

*—By James Oppenheim, inspired by banners carried by young
mill girls in the 1912 Lawrence textile strike.*

A great deal of confusion exists today about the role of women's liberation in a revolutionary movement. Hundreds of women's groups have sprung up within the past year or two, but among them, a number of very different and often conflicting ideologies have developed. The growth of these movements has demonstrated the desperate need that many women feel to escape their own oppression, but it has also shown that organization around women's issues need not lead to revolutionary consciousness, or even to an identification with the left. (Some groups mobilize middle class women to fight for equal privileges as businesswomen and academics; others maintain that the overthrow of capitalism is irrelevant for women.)

Many movement women have experienced the initial exhilaration of discovering women's liberation as an issue, of realizing that the frustration, anger, and fear we feel are not a result of individual failure but are shared by all our sisters, and of sensing—if not fully understanding—that these feelings stem from the same oppressive conditions that give rise to racism, chauvinism and the barbarity of American culture. But many movement women, too, have become disillusioned after a time by their experiences with women's liberation groups. More often than not these groups never get beyond the level of therapy sessions; rather than aiding the political development of women and building a revolutionary women's movement, they often encourage escape from political struggle.

The existence of this tendency among women's liberation groups is one reason why many movement activists (including some women) have come out against a women's liberation movement that distinguishes itself from the general movement, even if it considers itself part of the left. A movement organized by women around the oppression of women, they say, is bound to emphasize the bourgeois and personal aspects of oppression and to obscure the material oppression of working class women *and men*. At best, such a movement "lacks revolutionary potential" (Bernadine Dohrn, N.L.N., V.4, No.9). In SDS, where this attitude is very strong, questions about the oppression and liberation of women are raised only within the context of current SDS ideology and strategy; the question of women's liberation is raised only as an incidental, subordinate aspect of programs around "*the primary struggle,*" anti-racism. (Although most people in SDS now understand the extent of black people's oppression, they are not aware of the fact that the median wage of working women, (black and white) is lower than that of black males.) The

male domination of the organization has not been affected by occasional rhetorical attacks on male chauvinism and most important, very little organizing of women is being done.

Although the reason behind it can be understood, this attitude toward women's liberation is mistaken and dangerous. By discouraging the development of a revolutionary women's liberation movement, it avoids a serious challenge to what, along with racism, is the deepest source of division and false consciousness among workers. By setting up (in the name of Marxist class analysis) a dichotomy between the "bourgeois," personal and psychological forms of oppression on the one hand, and the "real" material forms on the other, it substitutes a mechanistic model of class relations for a more profound understanding of how these two aspects of oppression depend upon and reinforce each other. Finally, this anti-women's liberationist attitude makes it easier for us to bypass a confrontation of male chauvinism and the closely related values of elitism and authoritarianism which are weakening our movement.

I.

Before we can discuss the potential of a women's liberation movement, we need a more precise description of the way the oppression of women functions in a capitalist society. This will also help us understand the relation of psychological to material oppression.

(1) *Male Chauvinism—the attitude that women are the passive and inferior servants of society and of men—sets women apart from the rest of the working class.* Even when they do the same work as men, women are not considered workers in the same sense, with the need and right to work to provide for their families or to support themselves independently. They are expected to accept work at lower wages and without job security. Thus they can be used as a marginal or reserve labor force when profits depend on extra low costs or when men are needed for war.

Women are not supposed to be independent, so they are not supposed to have any "right to work." This means, in effect, that although they do work, they are denied the right to organize and fight for better wages and conditions. Thus the role of women in the labor force undermines the struggles of male workers as well. The boss can break a union drive by threatening to hire lower paid women or blacks. In many cases, where women are organized, the union contract reinforces their inferior position, making women the least loyal and militant union members. (Standard Oil workers in San Francisco recently paid the price of male supremacy. Women at Standard Oil have the least chance for advancement and decent

pay, and the union has done little to fight this. Not surprisingly, women formed the core of the back to work move that eventually broke the strike.)¹

In general, because women are defined as docile, helpless, and inferior, they are forced into the most demeaning and mindrotting jobs—from scrubbing floors to filing cards—under the most oppressive conditions where they are treated like children or slaves. Their very position reinforces the idea, even among the women themselves, that they are fit for and should be satisfied with this kind of work.

(2) *Apart from the direct, material exploitation of women, male supremacy acts in more subtle ways to undermine class consciousness.* The tendency of male workers to think of themselves primarily as men (i.e., powerful) rather than as workers (i.e., members of an oppressed group) promotes a false sense of privilege and power, and an identification with the world of men, including the boss. The petty dictatorship which most men exercise over their wives and families enables them to vent their anger and frustration in a way which poses no challenge to the system. The role of the man in the family reinforces aggressive individualism, authoritarianism, and a hierarchical view of social relations—values which are fundamental to the perpetuation of capitalism. In this system we are taught to relieve our fears and frustrations by brutalizing those weaker than we are: a man in uniform turns into a pig; the foreman intimidates the man on the line; the husband beats his wife, child, and dog.

(3) *Women are further exploited in their roles as housewives and mothers, through which they reduce the costs (social and economic) of maintaining the labor force.* All of us will admit that inadequate as it may be American workers have a relatively decent standard of living, in a strictly material sense, when compared to workers of other countries or periods of history. But American workers are exploited and harassed in other ways than through the size of the weekly paycheck. They are made into robots on the job; they are denied security; they are forced to pay for expensive insurance and can rarely save enough to protect them from sudden loss of job or emergency. They are denied decent medical care and a livable environment. They are cheated by inflation. They are “given” a regimented education that prepares them for a narrow slot or for nothing. And they are taxed heavily to pay for these “benefits.”

In all these areas, it is a woman's responsibility to make up for the failures of the system. In countless working class families, it is mother's job that bridges the gap between week to week subsistence and relative security. It is her wages that enable the family to eat better food, to escape

their oppressive surroundings through a trip, an occasional movie, or new clothes. It is her responsibility to keep her family healthy despite the cost of decent medical care; to make a comfortable home in an unsafe and unlivable neighborhood; to provide a refuge from the alienation of work and to keep the male ego in good repair. It is she who must struggle daily to make ends meet despite inflation. She must make up for the fact that her children do not receive a decent education and she must salvage their damaged personalities.

A woman is judged as a wife and mother—the only role she is allowed—according to her ability to maintain stability in her family and to help her family “adjust” to harsh realities. She therefore transmits the values of hard work and conformity to each generation of workers. It is she who forces her children to stay in school and “behave” or who urges her husband not to risk his job by standing up to the boss or going on strike.

Thus the role of wife and mother is one of social mediator and pacifier. She shields her family from the direct impact of class oppression. She is the true opiate of the masses.

(4) *Working class women and other women as well are exploited as consumers.* They are forced to buy products which are necessities, but which have waste built into them, like the soap powder the price of which includes fancy packaging and advertising. They also buy products which are wasteful in themselves because they are told that a new car or TV will add to their families' status and satisfaction, or that cosmetics will increase their desirability as sex objects. Among “middle class” women, of course, the second type of wasteful consumption is more important than it is among working class women, but all women are victims of both types to a greater or lesser extent, and the values which support wasteful consumption are part of our general culture.

(5) *All women, too, are oppressed and exploited sexually.* For working class women this oppression is more direct and brutal. They are denied control of their own bodies, when as girls they are refused information about sex and birth control, and when as women they are denied any right to decide whether and when to have children. Their confinement to the role of sex partner and mother, and their passive submission to a single man are often maintained by physical force. The relative sexual freedom of “middle class” or college educated women, however, does not bring *them* real independence. Their sexual role is still primarily a passive one; their value as individuals still determined by their ability to attract, please, and hold onto a man. The definition of women as docile and dependent, inferior in intellect and weak in character cuts across class lines.

A woman of any class is expected to sell herself—not just her body but

her entire life, her talents, interests, and dreams—to a man. She is expected to give up friendships, ambitions, pleasures, and moments of time to herself in order to serve his career or his family. In return, she receives not only her livelihood but her identity, her very right to existence, for unless she is the wife of someone or the mother of someone, a woman is nothing.

In this summary of the forms of oppression of women in this society, the rigid dichotomy between material oppression and psychological oppression fails to hold, for it can be seen that these two aspects of oppression reinforce each other at every level. A woman may seek a job out of absolute necessity, or in order to escape repression and dependence at home. In either case, on the job she will be persuaded or forced to accept low pay, indignity and a prison-like atmosphere because a woman isn't supposed to need money or respect. Then, after working all week turning tiny wires, or typing endless forms, she finds that cooking and cleaning, dressing up and making up, becoming submissive and childlike in order to please a man is her only relief, so she gladly falls back into her "proper" role.

All women, even including those of the ruling class, are oppressed as women in the sense that their real fulfillment is linked to their role as girlfriend, wife or mother. This definition of women is part of bourgeois culture—the whole superstructure of ideas that serves to explain and reinforce the social relations of capitalism. It is applied to all women, but it has very different consequences for women of different classes. For a ruling class woman, it means she is denied real independence, dignity, and sexual freedom. For a working class woman it means this too, but it also justifies her material super-exploitation and physical coercion. Her oppression is a total one.²

II.

It is true, as the movement critics assert, that the present women's liberation groups are almost entirely based among "middle class" women, that is, college and career women; and the issues of psychological and sexual exploitation and, to a lesser extent, exploitation through consumption, have been the most prominent ones.

It is not surprising that the women's liberation movement should begin among bourgeois women, and should be dominated in the beginning by their consciousness and their particular concerns. Radical women are generally the post war middle class generation that grew up with the right

to vote, the chance at higher education and training for supportive roles in the professions and business. Most of them are young and sophisticated enough to have not yet had children and do not have to marry to support themselves. In comparison with most women, they are capable of a certain amount of control over their lives.

The higher development of bourgeois democratic society allows the women who benefit from education and relative equality to see the contradictions between its rhetoric (every boy can become president) and their actual place in that society. The working class woman might believe that education could have made her financially independent but the educated career woman finds that money has not made her independent. In fact, because she has been allowed to progress halfway on the upward-mobility ladder she can see the rest of the distance that is denied her only because she is a woman. She can see the similarity between her oppression and that of other sections of the population. Thus, from their own experience, radical women in the movement are aware of more faults in the society than racism and imperialism. Because they have pushed the democratic myth to its limits, they know concretely how it limits them.

At the same time that radical women were learning about American society they were also becoming aware of the male chauvinism in the movement. In fact, that is usually the cause of their first conscious verbalization of the prejudice they feel; it is more disillusioning to know that the same contradiction exists between the movement's rhetoric of equality and its reality, for we expect more of our comrades.

This realization of the deep-seated prejudice against themselves in the movement produces two common reactions among its women: 1) a preoccupation with this immediate barrier (and perhaps a resultant hopelessness), and (2) a tendency to retreat inward, to buy the fool's gold of creating a personally liberated life style.

However, our concept of liberation represents a consciousness that conditions have forced on us while most of our sisters are chained by other conditions, biological and economic, that overwhelm their humanity and desires for self fulfillment. Our background accounts for our ignorance about the stark oppression of women's daily lives.

Few radical women really know the worst of women's condition. They do not understand the anxious struggle of an uneducated girl to find the best available man for financial security and escape from a crowded and repressive home. They have not suffered years of fear from ignorance and helplessness about pregnancies. Few have experienced constant violence and drunkenness of a brutalized husband or father. They do not know the day to day reality of being chained to a house and family, with little

money and lots of bills, and no diversions but TV.

Not many radical women have experience 9-11 hours a day of hard labor, carrying trays on aching legs for rude customers who may leave no tip, but leave a feeling of degradation from their sexual or racist remarks—and all of this for \$80-\$90 a week. Most movement women have not learned to blank out their thoughts for 7 hours in order to type faster or file endless numbers. They have not felt their own creativity deadened by this work, while watching men who were not trained to be typists move on to higher level jobs requiring “brain-work.”

In summary: because male supremacy (assumption of female inferiority, regulation of women to service roles, and sexual objectification) crosses class lines, radical women are conscious of women's oppression, but because of their background, they lack consciousness of most women's class oppression.



The development of the movement has produced different trends within the broad women's liberation movement. Most existing women's groups fall into one of the four following categories:

(1) *Personal Liberation Groups*. This type of group has been the first manifestation of consciousness of their own oppression among movement women. By talking about their frustrations with their role in the movement, they have moved from feelings of personal inadequacy to the realization that male supremacy is one of the foundations of the society that must be destroyed. Because it is at the level of the direct oppression in our daily lives that most people become conscious, it is not surprising that this is true of women in the movement. Lenin once complained about this phenomenon to Clara Zetkin, leader of the German women's socialist movement: “I have been told that at the evening meetings arranged for reading and discussion with working women, sex and marriage problems come first.”

But once women have discovered the full extent of the prejudice against them they cannot ignore it, whether Lenin approves or not, and they have found women's discussions helpful in dealing with their problems. These groups have continued to grow and split into smaller, more viable groups, showing just how widespread is women's dissatisfaction.

However, the level of politicization of these groups has been kept low by the very conditions that keep women underdeveloped in this society; and alienation from the male dominated movement has prolonged the politicization process. These groups still see the source of their oppression in “chauvinist attitudes,” rather than in the social relations of capitalism.



that produce those attitudes. Therefore, they don't confront male chauvinism collectively or politically. They become involved solely in "personal liberation"—attempts to create free life styles and define new criteria for personal relations in the hoped for system of the future. Bernadine Dohrn's criticism of these groups was a just one: "Their program is only a cycle that produces more women's groups, mostly devoted to a personal liberation/therapy function and promises of study which are an evasion of practice" (*N.L.N.*, V.4, No.9).

(2) *Anti-Left Groups*. Many women have separated from the movement out of bitterness and disillusionment with the left's ability to alter its built-in chauvinism. Some are now vociferously anti-left; others simply see the movement as irrelevant. In view of the fate of the ideal of women's equality in most socialist countries, their skepticism is not surprising. No, it is surprising that individuals with leadership abilities who are constantly thwarted in the movement turn to new avenues.

These women advocate a radical feminist movement totally separate from any other political movement. Their program involves female counter-institutions, such as communes and political parties, and attacks upon those aspects of women's oppression that affect all classes (abortion laws, marriage, lack of child care facilities, job discrimination, images of women in the media).

The first premise of the theory with which these radical feminists justify their movement is that women have always been exploited. They admit that women's oppression has a social basis—*men as a group oppress women as a group*—therefore, women must organize to confront male supremacy collectively. But they say that since women were exploited before capitalism, as well as in capitalist and "socialist" societies, the overthrow of capitalism is irrelevant to the equality of women. Male supremacy is a phenomenon outside the left-right political spectrum and must be fought separately.

But if one admits that female oppression has a social basis, it is necessary to specify the social relations on which this condition is based, and then to change those relations. (We maintain that the oppression of women is based on class divisions; these in turn are derived from the division of labor which developed between the stronger and weaker, the owner and the owned; e.g., women, under conditions of scarcity in primitive society.) Defining those relations as "men as a group vs. women as a group," as the anti-left groups seem to do, is ultimately reducible only to some form of biological determinism (women are inherently oppress-able) and leads to no solution in practice other than the elimination of one group or the other.

(3) *Movement Activists.* Many radical women who have become full time activists accept the attitude of most men in the movement that women's liberation is bourgeois and "personalist." They look at most of the present women's liberation groups and conclude that a movement based on women's issues is bound to emphasize the relatively mild forms of oppression experienced by students and "middle class" women while obscuring the fundamental importance of class oppression. "Sure middle class women are oppressed," they say, "but how can we concentrate on making our own lives more comfortable when working class women and men are so much more oppressed." Others point out that "women cannot be free in an unfree society; their liberation will come with that of the rest of us." These people maintain that organizing around women's issues is reformist because it is an attempt to ameliorate conditions within bourgeois society. Most movement activists agree that we should talk about women's oppression, but say we should do so only in terms of the super-exploitation of working women, especially black and brown working women, and not in terms of personal, psychological, and sexual oppression, which they see as a very different (and bourgeois) thing. They also say we should organize around women's oppression, but only as an aspect of our struggles against racism and imperialism. In other words, there should not be a separate revolutionary women's organization.

Yet strangely enough, demands for the liberation of women seldom find their way into movement programs, and very little organizing of women, within or apart from other struggles, is actually going on:

-In student organizing, no agitation for birth control for high school and college girls; no recognition of the other special restrictions that keep them from controlling their own lives; no propaganda about how women are still barred from many courses, especially those that would enable them to demand equality in employment.

-In open admissions fights, no propaganda about the channeling of girls into low-paying, deadend service occupations.

-In struggles against racism, talk about the black man's loss of manhood, but none about the sexual objectification and astounding exploitation of black women.

-In anti-repression campaigns, no fights against abortion laws; no defense of those "guilty" of abortion.

-In analysis of unions, no realization that women make less than black men and that most women aren't even organized yet. The demands for equal wages were recently raised in the Women's Resolution (at the December SDS, NC), but there are as yet no demands for free child care and equal work by husbands that would make the demand for equal wages

more than an empty gesture.

It is clear that radical women activists have not been able to educate the movement about its own chauvinism or bring the issue of male supremacy to an active presence in the movement's program any more than have the personal liberation groups.

The failure of the movement to deal with male supremacy is less the result of a conscious evaluation of the issue's impact than a product of the male chauvinism that remains deeply rooted in the movement itself. Most full-time women organizers work in an atmosphere dominated by aggressive "guerilla" street fighters and organizers (who usually have a silent female appendage), of charismatic theoreticians (whose ability to lay out an analysis is not hampered by the casual stroking of their girl's hair while everyone listens raptly), of decision-making meetings in which the strong voices of men in "ideological struggle" are only rarely punctuated by the voice of one of the girls more skilled in debate, and of movement offices in which the women are still the most reliable (after all, the men are busy speaking and organizing).

"Bad politics" and "sloppy thinking" baiting is particularly effective against women who have been socialized to fear aggressiveness, who tend to lack experience in articulating abstract concepts. And at the same time, a woman's acceptance in the movement still depends on her attractiveness, and men do not find women attractive when they are strong-minded and argue like men.

Many of the characteristics which one needs in order to become respected in the movement—like the ability to argue loud and fast and aggressively and to excel in the "I'm more revolutionary than you" style of debate—are traits which in our society consistently cultivates in men and discourages in women from childhood. But these traits are neither inherently male nor universally human; rather they are particularly appropriate to a brutally competitive capitalist society.

That most movement women fail to realize this, that their ideal is still the arrogant and coercive leader-organizer, that they continue to work at all in an atmosphere where women are consistently scorned, and where chauvinism and elitism are attacked in rhetoric only—all this suggests that most movement women are not really aware of their *own* oppression. They continue to assume that the reason they haven't "made it" in the movement is that they are not dedicated enough or that their politics are not developed enough. At the same time, most of these women are becoming acutely aware, along with the rest of the movement, of their own comfortable and privileged backgrounds compared with those of workers (and feel guilty about them). It is this situation that causes them

to regard women's liberation as a sort of counter-revolutionary self-indulgence.

There is a further reason for this; in the movement we have all become aware of the central importance of working people in a revolutionary movement and of the gap between their lives and most of our own. But at this point our understanding is largely an abstract one; we remain distant from and grossly ignorant of the real conditions working people face day to day. Thus our concept of working class oppression tends to be a one-sided and mechanistic one, contrasting "real" economic oppression to our "bourgeois hang-ups" with cultural and psychological oppression. We don't understand that the oppression of working people is a total one, in which the "psychological" aspects—the humiliation of being poor, uneducated, and powerless, the alienation of work, and the brutalization of family life—are not only real forms of oppression in themselves, but reinforce material oppression by draining people of their energy and will to fight. Similarly, the "psychological" forms of oppression that affect all women—sexual objectification and the definition of women as docile and serving—work to keep working class women in a position where they are super-exploited as workers and as housewives.

But because of our one-sided view of class oppression, most movement women do not see the relationship of their own oppression to that of working class women. This is why they conclude that a women's liberation movement cannot lead to class consciousness and does not have revolutionary potential.

(4) *Advocates of a Women's Liberation Movement.* A growing number of radical women see the need for an organized women's movement because: (1) they see revolutionary potential in women organizing against their direct oppression, that is, against male supremacy as well as their exploitation as workers; and (2) they believe that a significant movement for women's equality will develop within any socialist movement only through the conscious efforts of organized women, and they have seen that such consciousness does not develop in a male chauvinist movement born of a male supremacist society.

These women believe that radical women must agitate among young working class girls, rank and file women workers, and workers' wives, around a double front; against their direct oppression by male supremacist institutions, and against their exploitation as workers. They maintain that the cultural conditions of people's lives is as important as the economic basis of their oppression in determining consciousness. If the movement cannot incorporate such a program, these women say, then an organized women's liberation movement distinguished from the general movement must be formed, for only through such a movement will radical women

gain the consciousness to develop and carry through this program.

The question of "separation" from the movement is a thorny one, particularly if it is discussed only in the abstract. Concretely, the problem at the present time is simply: should a women's liberation movement be a caucus within SDS, or should it be more than that? The radical women's liberationists say the latter; their movement should have its own structure and program, although it should work closely with SDS, and most of its members would probably be active in SDS (or other movement projects and organizations) as individuals. It would be "separate" *within* the movement in the same sense that say, NOC is separate, or in the way that the organized women who call themselves "half of China" are separate within the Chinese revolution.

The reason for this is not simply that women need a separate organization in order to develop themselves. The radical women's liberationists believe that the true extent of women's oppression can be revealed and fought only if the women's liberation movement is dominated by working class women. This puts the question of "separation" from SDS in a different light. Most of us in the movement would agree that a revolutionary working class movement cannot be built within the present structure of the student movement, so that if we are serious about our own rhetoric, SDS itself will have to be totally transformed, or we will have to move beyond it, within the coming years.

The radical women's liberationists further believe that the American liberation movement will fail before it has barely begun if it does not recognize and deal with the elitism, coerciveness, aggressive individualism, and class chauvinism it has inherited from capitalist society. Since it is women who always bear the brunt of these forms of oppression, it is they who are most aware of them. Elitism, for example, affects many people in the movement to the detriment of the movement as a whole, but women are always on the very bottom rung of participation in decision-making. The more they are shut out, the less they develop the necessary skills, and elitism in the movement mirrors the vicious circle of bourgeois society.

The same characteristics in the movement that produce male chauvinism also lead to class chauvinism. Because women are politically underdeveloped—their education and socialization have not given them analytic and organizational skills—they are assumed to be politically inferior. But as long as we continue to evaluate people according to this criterion, our movement will automatically consider itself superior to working class people, who suffer a similar kind of oppression.

We cannot develop a truly liberating form of socialism unless we are consciously fighting these tendencies in our movement. This consciousness

can come from the organized efforts of those who are most aware of these faults because they are most oppressed by them, i.e. women. But in order to politicize their consciousness of their own oppression, and to make effective their criticisms of the movement, women need the solidarity and self-value they could gain from a revolutionary women's liberation movement involved in meaningful struggle.

What is the revolutionary potential of women's liberation?

The potential for revolutionary thought and action lies in the masses of super-oppressed and super-exploited working class women. We have seen the stagnation in New Left women's groups caused by the lack of the need to fight that class oppression produces. Unlike most radical women, working class women have no freedom of alternatives, no chance of achieving some slight degree of individual liberation. It is these women, through their struggle, who will develop a revolutionary women's liberation movement.

A women's liberation movement will be necessary if unity of the working class is ever to be achieved. Until working men see their female co-workers and their own wives as equal in their movement, and until those women see that it is in their own interests and that of their families to "dare to win," the position of women will continue to undermine every working class struggle.

The attitude of unions, and of the workers themselves, that women should not work, and that they do not do difficult or necessary work, helps to maintain a situation in which (1) many women who need income or independence cannot work, (2) women who do work are usually not organized, (3) union contracts reinforce the inferior position of women who are organized, and (4) women are further penalized with the costs of child care. As a result, most women workers do not see much value in organizing. They have little to gain from militant fights for better wages and conditions, and they have the most to risk in organizing in the first place.

The position of worker's wives outside their husbands' union often places them in antagonism to it. They know how little it does about safety and working conditions, grievances, and layoffs. The unions demand complete loyalty to strikes—which means weeks without income—and then sign contracts which bring little improvement in wages or conditions.

Thus on the simple trade union level, the oppression of women weakens the position of the workers as a whole. But any working class movement that does not deal with the vulnerable position of totally powerless women will have to deal with the false consciousness of those women.

The importance of a working class women's liberation movement goes beyond the need for unity. A liberation movement of the "slaves of the slave" tends to raise broader issues of peoples' oppression in all its forms, so that it is inherently wider than the economism of most trade union movements. For example, last year 187 women struck British Ford demanding equal wages (and shutting down 40,000 other jobs in the process). They won their specific demand, but Ford insisted that the women work all three rotating shifts, as the men do. The women objected that this would create great difficulty for them in their work as housekeepers and mothers, and that their husbands would not like it.

A militant women's liberation movement must go on from this point to demand (1) that mothers must also be free in the home, (2) that management must pay for child care facilities so that women can do equal work with men, and that (3) equal work *with* men must mean equal work *by* men. In this way, the winning of a simple demand for equality on the job raises much broader issues of the extent of inequality, the degree of exploitation, and the totality of the oppression of all the workers. It can show how women workers are forced to hold an extra full time job without pay or recognition that this is necessary work, how male chauvinism allows the capitalist class to exploit workers in this way, how people are treated like machines owned by the boss, and how the most basic conditions of workers lives are controlled in the interests of capitalism.

The workplace is not the only area in which the fight against women's oppression can raise the consciousness of everybody about the real functions of bourgeois institutions. Propaganda against sexual objectification and the demeaning of women in the media can help make people understand how advertising manipulates our desires and frustrations, and how the media sets up models of human relationships and values which we all unconsciously accept. A fight against the tracking of girls in school into low-level, deadend service jobs helps show how the education system channels and divides us all, playing upon the false self-images we have been given in school and by the media (women are best as secretaries and nurses; blacks aren't cut out for responsible positions; workers' sons aren't smart enough for college).

Struggles to free women from domestic slavery which may begin around demands for a neighborhood or factory child care center can lead to consciousness of the crippling effects of relations of domination and exploitation in the home, and to an understanding of how the institutions of marriage and the family embody those relations and destroy human potential.

In short, because the material oppression of women is integrally related to their psychological and sexual oppression, the women's liberation movement must necessarily raise these issues. In doing so it can make us all aware of how capitalism oppresses us, not only by drafting us, taxing us, and exploiting us on the job, but by determining the way we think, feel, and relate to each other.

IV.

In order to form a women's liberation movement based on the oppression of working class women we must begin to agitate on issues of "equal rights" and specific rights. Equal rights means all those "rights" that men are supposed to have: the right to work, to organize for equal pay, promotions, better conditions, equal (and *not* separate) education. Specific rights means those rights women must have if they are to be equal in the other areas: free, adequate child care, abortions, birth control for young women from puberty, self defense, desegregation of all institutions (schools, unions, jobs). It is not so much an academic question of what is correct theory as an inescapable empirical fact; women must fight their conditions just to participate in the movement.

The first reason why we need to fight on these issues is that we must serve the people. That slogan is not just rhetoric with the Black Panthers but reflects their determination to end the exploitation of their people. Similarly, the women's liberation movement will grow and be effective only to the extent that it abominates and fights the conditions of misery that so many women suffer every day. It will gain support only if it speaks to the immediate needs of women. For instance:

(1) We must begin to disseminate birth control information in high schools and fight the tracking of girls into inferior education. We must do this not only to raise the consciousness of these girls to their condition but because control of their bodies is the key to their participation in the future. Otherwise, their natural sexuality will be indirectly used to repress them from struggles for better jobs and organizing, because they will be encumbered with children and economically tied to the family structure for basic security.

(2) We must raise demands for maternity leave and child-care facilities provided (paid for, but not controlled) by management as a rightful side benefit of women workers. This is important not only for what those issues say about women's right to work but so that women who choose to have children have more freedom to participate in the movement.

(3) We must agitate for rank and file revolt against the male supremacist hierarchy of the unions and for demands for equal wages. Only through

winning such struggles for equality can the rank and file be united and see their common enemies—management and union hierarchy. Wives of workers must fight the chauvinist attitudes of their husbands simply to be able to attend meetings.

(4) We must organize among store clerks, waitresses, office workers, and hospital workers where vast numbers of women have no bargaining rights or security. In doing so we will have to confront the question of a radical strategy towards established unions and the viability of independent unions.

(5) We must add to the liberal demands for abortion reform by fighting against the hospital and doctors boards that such reforms consist of. They will in no way make abortions more available for the majority of non-middle class women or young girls who will still be forced to home remedies and butchers. We must insist at all times on the right of every woman to control her own body.

(6) We must demand the right of women to protect themselves. Because the pigs protect property and not people, because the violence created by the brutalization of many men in our society is often directed at women, and because not all women are willing or able to sell themselves (or to limit their lives) for the protection of a male, women have a right to self-protection.

This is where the struggle must begin, although it cannot end here. In the course of the fight we will have to raise the issues of the human relationships in which the special oppression of women is rooted: sexual objectification, the division of labor in the home, and the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family. But organizing "against the family" cannot be the basis of a program. An uneducated working class wife with five kids is perfectly capable of understanding that marriage has destroyed most of her potential as a human being—probably she already understands this—but she is hardly in a position to repudiate her source of livelihood and free herself of those children. If we expect that of her, we will never build a movement.

As the women's liberation movement gains strength, the development of cooperative child care centers and living arrangements, and the provision of birth control may allow more working class women to free themselves from slavery as sex objects and housewives. But at the present time, the insistence by some women's liberation groups that we must "organize against sexual objectification," and that only women who repudiate the family can really be part of the movement, reflects the class chauvinism and lack of seriousness of women who were privileged enough to avoid economic dependence and sexual slavery in the first place.

In no socialist country have women yet achieved equality or full

liberation, but in the most recent revolutions (Vietnam, Cuba, and China's cultural revolution) the women's struggle has intensified. It may be that in an advanced society such as our own, where women have had relatively more freedom, a revolutionary movement may not be able to avoid a militant women's movement developing within it. But the examples of previous attempts at socialist revolutions prove that the struggle must be instigated *by* militant women; liberation is not handed down from above.

Footnotes

1. See *Movement*, May 1969, p. 6-7.

2. We referred above to "middle class" forms of oppression, contrasting the opportunity for wasteful consumption among relatively affluent women, and superficial sexual freedom of college women to the conditions of poor and uneducated working women. Here "middle class" refers more to a life style, a bourgeois cultural ideal, than to a social category. Strictly speaking, a middle class person is one who does not employ other people but also does not have to sell his labor for wages to live, e.g., a doctor or owner of a small family business. Many people who think of themselves as "middle class," and who can afford more than they need to live on are, strictly speaking, working class people because they must sell their labor, e.g., high school teachers and most white collar workers. There is, of course, a real difference in living conditions as well as consciousness between these people and most industrial workers. But because of the middle class myth, a tremendous gap in consciousness can exist even where conditions are essentially the same. There are literally millions of female clerical workers, telephone operators, etc., who work under the most proletarianized conditions, doing the most tedious female-type labor, and making the same wages, or even less, as sewing machine factory workers, who nevertheless think of themselves as in a very different "class" from those factory women.

MYRNA WOOD has been working with the women's liberation and anti-war movements in Toronto and Montreal.

KATHY McA FEE is a member of the N.Y. LEVIATHAN staff.

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