
Letters To The Editor...

Women's Health Collective writes

The following letter from the Women's Health Collective concerns an article in the October issue of the *Organizer*:

To the *Organizer*,

We in the Health Collective are very disturbed about the way you chose to respond to our letter concerning the PWOC's International Women's Day Event, March 1977. We wrote a long letter sharing our thoughts about the event in an effort to promote an exchange. We included specifics about the March 8th event in the context of our beliefs in socialist-feminism.

By taking three paragraphs of our three page letter out of context, you made a conscious decision not to engage in a comradely exchange of ideas, but rather to use our letter as a spring board for your own analysis of feminism. In this way, not only have you distorted the politics of the Health Collective, but you also decided to cut-off what was hoped would be a fruitful give and take.

Furthermore, we never agreed to having only part of our letter printed and we would not have agreed to the way you took parts of our letter out of context. We feel that it is certainly legitimate for your organization to respond to our letter (or any other letters to the Editor) as you see fit. It is not, however, principled to print our letter out of context without even showing us ahead of time what you intended to print!

We hope that you will print our entire letter of May 1977 as well as this response. In addition, we hope that in the future if you plan to cut letters to the editor you will make sure that you accurately represent the points of view expressed.

In struggle,
The Women's Health Collective

The *Organizer* responds: We have already criticised ourselves for our failure to consult with the WHC in regard to our treatment of their letter (see open letter, pg. 2 of Nov. *Organizer*). We do not agree, however, that our excerpts of this letter misrepresented the position of the WHC.

For reasons of space and relevance we chose the parts of the letter that we thought expressed the essential political outlook of the WHC and where our disagreement was most fundamental.

The WHC letter raises several criticisms that we did not reprint or respond to because we think they are based on a misunderstanding of our perspective (We do not hold that "the production line is the work site" or that women's oppression can be "defined narrowly as a denial of democratic rights", at least as WHC understands the term) Thus a discussion of these points in the pages of the *Organizer* did not appear fruitful to us.

At the request of the WHC we are printing their entire May 1st letter.

Dear Sisters and Brothers of PWOC:

We are writing, at this late date, to share our perceptions of the celebration of International Women's Day that was presented by PWOC on March 12; we apologize for being so late in formulating this response.

We are socialists and feminists, firmly committed to political struggle and work to create a non-sexist, non-racist society which is organized and controlled by the people. We heard your repeated calls for unity on March 12 and came to the event, as did many feminists, in that spirit of unity.

We believe that all of us on the left, whether we work in the women's movement, in community organizations, the trade union movement or part of any progressive movement, have a common commitment to the same struggle, and a need for each other's perspective and understanding of what must be done to reach our goals. We believe that we are united with PWOC around certain aspects of your program, and therefore in the interest of our common goals, we felt we must share our criticisms with you.

The event was very exciting — it was great to see so many people turn out for a movement event, and to see a multiracial both working and middle-class group of people join to celebrate International Women's Day. It was obvious that preparation for the event was thoughtful — childcare was excellent, the program was carefully planned and balanced between music, speeches and theater.

It was good that you had a bar and that there was time for people to meet one another and talk in a relaxed way. We felt that this planning had resulted in the kind of event in which people were comfortable and receptive to political ideas.

Our criticisms center on some of the content of the speeches. First, we felt that all the speakers defined the working class in this country too narrowly, thereby ignoring the real working conditions and problems of most women. By assuming the production line to be the work site, you overlook the fact that the majority of US workers labor in clerical, service, and sales jobs.

Subsequently, there was little mention of the role that unpaid housewife labor plays in a capitalist economy. Only if you broaden the concept of a working class in our society, will it be possible to speak relevantly about areas of work where women are to be found.

Secondly, women's oppression was also defined narrowly as a denial of democratic rights. This analysis cannot account for the forces which lead to (a) violence — even within the family — directed primarily against women and female children (e.g., rape, molestation, abuse); (b) sexual objectification of women and young girls (as in now popular child pornography); (c) societal definition of women which on the one hand glorifies and mystifies them, and on the other hand weakens and demeans them by viewing them as secondary to men. Demands such as equal pay for equal work while important are a limited and inadequate res-

ponse to the nature of the problem.

We know we disagree about the basic causes of women's oppression. We believe that patriarchy has a force and life of its own, predating and outside of the capitalist economy. Because of this, we think an autonomous women's liberation movement will always be a necessary part of the struggle to overthrow the present order.

Our most overriding criticism lies in the manner in which the women's movement and feminism were portrayed. For example, we found it ironic that feminism was denounced at a gathering celebrating International Women's Day — feminism was casually described as a "false alternative" by the speaker from New York. This event would not even have taken place had not an autonomous women's liberation movement begun in the late 60's, and had that movement not revived the holiday originally created by working women.

The women's movement (or the "democratic women's movement") was repeatedly defined as a monolithic movement without a left and right wing, and without ideological struggle. If you were describing the new communist movement, you would make a much more precise delineation between different political tendencies and would project an understanding of the importance of struggle between reformist and revolutionary tendencies. On the other hand, your description of women's liberation could have been found in the mass media. It is not well thought out for a left group to assume the media's view of any political movement.

Your description — "a movement concerned only with providing increased upward mobility for already middle-class women, and which defines men as the enemy" — confuses the bourgeois wing of the movement (MS magazine, CLUW, Women's Political Caucus, etc.) with the socialist and separatist wings of the movement. This confusion indicates a failure to understand the complexity of the discussion now going on within the women's liberation movement about our future goals and directions.

For example, it is many lesbian-separatists, coming themselves from a working

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class background, who have pushed most articulately for an increased class consciousness within the women's movement. In fact, the women's movement has a history of concern with issues that face both working and middle-class women in this country — rape, wife abuse, child support and custody, support for women-headed households, pro se divorce, oppression of homosexuals, job and wage discrimination, job training, prostitution, abortion and sterilization and the quality of health care in general. Most of these issues were not discussed or considered important by the left before women's liberation began raising them and were not brought up on March 12.

Therefore, your portrayal of the women's liberation movement not only did not credit it with making revolutionary contributions to the left, but sharply criticized it in ways which were unnecessarily undermining and enraging to those of us who have put our political energies into women's liberation for a number of years. We consider ourselves to be part of the thousands of women in the US who have fought hard over the past eight years to define potentially revolutionary goals for women's liberation. We have helped

to found and sustain it. We are in a difficult struggle with forces of cooptation — those of you working in the trade union movement should have a deep understanding of this process. When you don't acknowledge the left wing of women's liberation, you are strengthening the bourgeois reformers.

We are not saying that it is easy to portray the women's liberation movement — anyone who reads women's literature knows that it is full of struggle. But if we are to be criticized at public gatherings, especially when there are people present who know us only through the mass media, we hope criticism of the movement will be done more fairly and accurately.

We were stirred by the evening, and a part of our intense reaction to it has to do with our self-criticism for having avoided struggle in the recent past. We see this letter as an attempt to promote principled discussion of these ideas either individually with members of PWOC or in the areas of political work which we already share.

Sincerely,
Women's Health Collective
Philadelphia

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