

WOMEN: the struggle for liberation



BY THE WORKER-STUDENT ORGANIZING COLLECTIVE (WSOC)

This paper is a contribution to women and organizations searching for an understanding of women's oppression and a strategy for women's liberation. It is also a contribution to the theoretical debate on the interrelationship between women's liberation and the struggle for socialism. Our basic premise in writing this paper is that women are a revolutionary force in our society, that they must organize, and that they must play a leadership role in defining their oppression and devising tactics for their liberation.

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INTRODUCTION

On the job, in the home, in communities, women of all ages and nationalities are questioning their lives as women, the social and economic roles they have been taught to assume, and their position in society.

At work, women confront low-paying jobs and discrimination in hiring, promotion and wages. Elsewhere, they face the lack of daycare centers for their children, forced sterilization by the government, physical violence, legal and social inequality reinforced by mass media and educational institutions, demeaning sexist and chauvinist attitudes, the inability to choose sexual orientation free from social ostracism or legal harassment. For women who are not financially privileged and for those who are victims of racism, the list is endless. They are confronted with oppression and exploitation in every aspect of their lives.

The need to understand this oppression has produced a wide range of "answers." These include the lesbian separatist movement, Marabel Morgan's "Total Woman," and a myriad of other theories and organizations. But many women have yet to find an analysis which makes sense, which gives them a way of understanding their condition and which offers the real possibility of liberation for all women.

To understand the oppression of women, and to develop a strategy for real liberation from that oppression, we must first understand the context in which women's inferior economic and social status developed and exists today.

ROOT OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

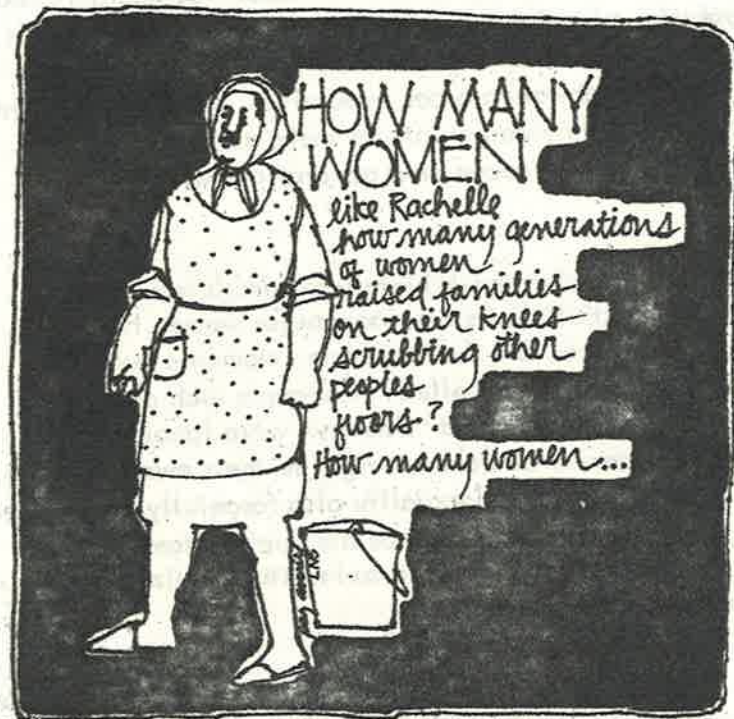
The oppression of women can be traced back to the emergence of private property and private accumulation. Anthropological evidence* shows that in early societies, groups of men and women labored together for common subsistence and shared totally the results of their work. The entire society was interdependent. There were no owners for whom other people worked, and therefore there were no classes. In pre-class society, a sexual division of labor did exist, but it was based on women's biological capacity to reproduce and nurse children, and on men's greater mobility. There was no distinction of power or status to either role. The community relied on each person's contribution and its resources were owned and shared by all. Women's and men's work were equally important.

The family in pre-class society was not an isolated economic unit as it is today. There was no distinction between public and private work: men and women worked for the benefit of the whole community, and each individual - female or male - had an economic role and responsibility to the group. There was no particular function or role for couples as a unit within the larger community.

*Frederick Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, New World Paperbacks.
Eleanor Burke Leacock, Introduction to the above work, citing numerous recent anthropological studies.
Rayna R. Reiter, editor, Toward an Anthropology of Women, Monthly Review Press.

THE PRIVATIZATION OF "WOMEN'S WORK"

Gradually, domestication of animals and the breeding of herds of cattle created the possibility of accumulation, of surplus beyond what was needed for immediate consumption. Since the surplus occurred in men's areas of work, men's position in the community began to assume more importance. Correspondingly, women's work which did not produce a surplus eventually came to be valued less than men's.



The possibility of accumulation also led to the possibility of private ownership, and over generations a society based on stratified divisions of ownership (classes) developed. Since women had been denied access to ownership of property, their class identity was determined by the class position of their husbands and fathers. With the develop-

ment of women's economic dependence on men, their relationship to men became distorted by its very necessity. The material basis for women's subjugation was established.

With the victory of private property over commonly-owned property and the development of a government apparatus - the State - to protect private accumulation, the individual family emerged as a separate economic unit, totally responsible for its own economic survival and for the rearing of the next generation. For the non-propertied class, this meant that most of the product of its labor was appropriated by those who owned the means of production (the materials and tools needed to make a product), to whom they had to sell their labor power in order to survive. For the propertied class, it meant they could pass on their accumulated wealth and power to successive generations within their family.

In order to ensure that the privately accumulated property went to its "rightful" heirs, monogamy for women had to be strictly enforced. At the same time, women's sexuality itself became rigidly controlled. Concepts such as "virginity," "chastity," and "fidelity" were ideological covers for the denial of women's right to their own sexuality. Strict taboos against homosexuality also forcefully channelled women, and men as well, towards the nuclear family. The power of the state was then used to institutionalize these social and family relations.

Today, most men in a capitalist society own nothing but their labor power, i.e. their ability to work. The factories, farms, corporations are owned and controlled by a handful of monopoly capitalists. However, because of the historical development of the economic primacy of men, even working class men in our society receive higher pay than working class women. The male is therefore the major breadwinner

of the family even if the woman is also working. This situation perpetuates women's subordination to the man, and provides a material basis for the development of sexist and chauvinist attitudes in the home.

With the stratification of classes and the emergence of the individual family, the developing inequality between men's and women's work was rigidified even further. Roles which women had once performed as equally necessary contributions to the community became transformed into private individual service within the family. Women acquired primary responsibility for ensuring that their husbands and/or children would be cared for, the home maintained, and the sons and daughters prepared to participate in society.

Although most women see this job as a personal one, in fact they are performing a social and economic function: maintaining the present workforce (husbands and selves), and preparing the next (children). The drudgery of "women's work" is not shared equally by adults in the family, or by the society at large which benefits from this work. In becoming wives and mothers, women perform a social function vital to the continuity of the capitalist system, but for free and as a personal service.

The economic dependence of family members on the man's ability to provide subsistence was the foundation for patriarchal authority, and is still the main reason for its existence today. That economic dependence and the patriarchal social relations that stem from it flow out of an economic system that finds it profitable to keep women as free child-rearers and maintainers of the home, and/or as an army of low-paid members of the workforce.

IN THE HOME AND ON THE JOB

With the birth of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, women's role was expanded to include a new function. The development of industry and mechanized production created the need for a large, unskilled workforce.



Although the ruling class ideology promoted the concept of femininity, daintiness and passivity which was reflected in the lives of ruling class women, millions of working class families - out of a desperate need for survival and totally dependent on their own resources - sent men, women

and children into the mills and factories. Women then labored in the factories long hours for starvation wages, and still held total responsibility for home tasks and child-rearing as well.

In the 20th century, the contradictions between the domestic (home) and social (workplace) spheres of women's lives became sharper as more and more women became incorporated into social production. Women worked 16 hours a day for the lowest wages and then returned home only to work many more hours cooking, cleaning, washing, serving husbands and children. Although men were also oppressed and exploited on their jobs, they were never held responsible for the chores of the home, and women's other role in the home justified men's priority over women on the job. Women were paid less, and during times of recession or economic slack, they would be laid off first. For example, women were hired during World War II, even for jobs in heavy industry, because the wartime economy demanded their labor.

At that time, they were encouraged to feel they had a social responsibility and value wider than the individual family, that it was not "negligent" to leave their children to go to work, and that no kind of work was too difficult or "unfeminine." Child care centers were established in many factories and workplaces to enable women to work, and states passed legislation providing assistance with childcare as well. However, when the War ended and men returned to the domestic labor force, the capitalist economy could not sustain an expanded workforce of both male and female workers. Women were laid off from their jobs, encouraged to return to their "real" tasks as wives and mothers, and daycare centers were closed.

But post-World War II America saw drastic changes in women's role. Newly developed methods of birth control

freed large numbers of women for the first time in history from the biological inevitability of reproduction, and gave them greater control over their own sexuality. At the same time, the rising standard of living, increasing inflation, and opportunities for work outside the home created by an expanding economy during the height of U.S. imperialist domination of other countries, encouraged more women to re-enter the workforce. In some cases women were working to help support their families, but in increasing numbers they were in fact the sole supporters. And again, the contradictions between the private responsibility for the domestic sphere and the economic necessity of social participation in the workforce increased. Many women began to question why society did not provide adequate daycare, and why work done in the home was seen as primarily the responsibility of the woman, and as an individual rather than a social responsibility.

Today, women are most often found in jobs which repeat the characteristics of the wife/mother role, i.e. low-paying "service" jobs. Many women work part-time or on a temporary basis in order to accommodate their obligations at home. Their jobs often involve disagreeable tasks that a full-time, permanent worker might refuse to do or expect extra compensation for. Minority women suffer the triple oppression of race, sex, and class discrimination. Third World women hold the lowest paying, least secure jobs with the worst working conditions of any group in the workforce.

Yet the development of large-scale industry which has subjected more and more women to capitalist exploitation at the workplace has also created the very conditions for women to struggle for their liberation. This is not to suggest that a oppressive job is preferable to oppression at home. But as women leave the isolation of the individual home and enter social production, they can develop the social

power that comes from uniting with fellow workers. Engels noted in The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State that "to emancipate woman and to make her the equal of man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time."



Domestic labor is the one labor process which has not been socialized, though there is nothing inherent in the nature of the work that prevents it from being so. Because work done in the home is not part of the expenses capitalists must incur directly to produce their profits, capitalists have no interest in whether a domestic chore takes one hour or four to be completed. Work done in the home therefore remains the least efficient organization of labor under capitalism. Because there is no direct payment out of capital's pocket to pay for domestic labor, there is no impetus to re-organize it to improve its efficiency.



SEXIST AND MALE CHAUVINIST IDEOLOGY

Capitalism needs to perpetuate and reinforce ideas and attitudes which rationalize and justify women's economic and social status, and which also disguise the common class interests of working men and women. For example, both women and men grow up learning that women's most important job is in the home serving husbands and children. Both women and men internalize from media and advertising the idea that women are sex objects whose value and importance is in attractiveness and providing pleasure to men. The

concept of "femininity" projected in books, magazines, etc. also propagates the idea that women have a special ability to provide emotional recourse and support to husbands and children.

These ideas and attitudes constitute a sexist ideology. Where do they come from? From what concrete conditions did they arise? They developed from the economic and social usefulness of women's oppressed status in the home and workforce, and have been perpetuated by mass media, schools, and other intellectual and cultural institutions. Women are ideologically conditioned to view their self-value in terms of personal appearance and sexuality, to depend on male recognition and approval, and to seek fulfillment in the role of wife and mother. Why and how is it socially useful to our society for women to have these ideas? Because they encourage women to be satisfied with the economically profitable role which capitalism reserves for them: free labor in the home, and cheap transient labor on the job.

On the other hand, in a society like China today the ideological and cultural images of women are of workers doing a variety of tasks: as welders, farmers, political cadres, doctors, etc. Magazines and films portray women as strong and resourceful.* Why does China have such a different view of women? These ideas also have a material base: in China, as a socialist system, the economy is not based on oppression and exploitation of some members of society by others, and there is therefore no purpose to be served in restricting women to certain inferior roles. Rather, in a socialist system, the society benefits by encouraging every woman (and every man) to fully develop her potential and contribute as much as she can. And at the same time, the society as a whole accepts responsibility for the necessary socialization tasks of child-care and child-rearing. In China, the interests of society and the interests of women coincide. In the U.S. under capitalism, they are in conflict.

*Ruth Sidel, Women and Childcare in China, Penguin Books.

In the U.S., despite the dominant image of women as housewives, mothers, and sex symbols, the majority of women's lives are nothing like the media image. Poor, working class, and minority women have always had to work outside the home. However, this bourgeois ideological conditioning still has its effect on all who live in this society. Many working women identify themselves primarily as wives and mothers, and only secondarily as workers. The material reality of time-consuming household responsibilities, reinforced by this ideological conditioning, has made many women tolerate and accept an inferior economic status.

For women to challenge this status, it is crucial that they develop an understanding of how sexist and chauvinist ideology has distorted their perceptions and expectations of themselves. As women begin to develop this understanding and to fight against sexist conditioning, they begin to make the links between their oppression as women and their exploitation on the job.

However, the struggle against thousands of years of ideological conditioning is not easy. Women today whose material reality diverges from the traditional role (e.g. single women, lesbians, single mothers) are looked down on with scorn and suffer a more acute social and economic oppression. These women cannot identify themselves primarily as wives and/or mothers because that is not their concrete reality. The options expressed by their lives threaten the continuation of a rigid ideology which attempts to limit women to performing roles which are profitable to capitalism.

Ultimately, the struggle for women's liberation must be fought against both women's dependent economic status that creates patriarchal authority in the family, and against the sexist and chauvinist ideology that develops from and

reinforces that economic dependence. The economic status -- as the foundation for the ideology -- is key, but clearly an attack on sexist ideology is necessary to expose the economic base and social oppression.

OVERVIEW: WOMEN'S STRUGGLES FOR CHANGE



MY WISH IS TO RIDE THE TEMPEST, TAME THE WAVES, KILL THE SHARKS. I WANT TO DRIVE THE ENEMY AWAY TO SAVE OUR PEOPLE. I WILL NOT RESIGN MYSELF TO THE USUAL LOT OF WOMEN.

--Trieu Thi Trunh,
a Vietnamese woman

From slave rebellions to the fight for the 8-hour day and decent working conditions, women have played a militant role in fighting against their oppression and exploitation. Harriet Tubman, who organized the Underground Railroad in the early 19th century and led thousands of Black people to non-slave territory; Mother Jones, who braved the worst conditions to help organize the coal miners of the South; and Madame Binh of Vietnam who helped lead her country to victory over U.S. aggression are women whose lives of strength, commitment, and struggle directly contradict what women have been taught from birth -- to be passive and submissive.

With the entrance of large numbers of women into the workforce in the 1800's, the oppression and exploitation of women took new and intensified forms. However, it also reintroduced them to social interdependence and social organization. Only by working together could the machines be put into motion and the necessities of life produced. In many areas of industry, women, recognizing their interdependence and collective power, organized for their mutual benefit and support, and led militant struggles for better working conditions. The garment trades were a key arena of these struggles. After the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, for example, women workers went out on strike against their working conditions and to demand a living wage. International Women's Day is celebrated annually on March 8 in countries around the world to commemorate this event and the struggles and strengths of working women.

The women from the Triangle Factory were fighting their exploitation as workers, not as women per se. But the struggle of women workers is also part of the struggle for women's liberation. In the course of such struggle, women experience their collective strength. They potentially can also develop an understanding of their real enemy -- an economic system based on profit instead of human needs -- which is the fundamental source of women's oppression.

RACISM AND SEXISM

Black women's struggles against racism are linked with Black women's oppression as women because racism's roots lie in the same capitalist system that profits from and perpetuates sexism. Racism and sexism are integrally connected in the oppression of minority women, and any

struggle against racist oppression is also a struggle for minority women's power over their own lives.

Under slavery, for example, the life and labor of Black men and women were the property of the slave owner. But for the Black women, there was also a specific form of oppression and exploitation: the slaveowner's right to her sexuality. Sex as a property relationship was, of course, not unique to slavery, and it still exists in various forms today. But where whites, because of racism, are more likely to be the owners, bosses, landlords, and police -- i.e., those with power -- sexism for Black women also becomes inseparable from racism. The modern-day case of Joann Little, who as a prisoner was sexually attacked by her white jailer and then accused of murder for defending herself, is only one example of the interconnection of these two repressive ideologies.

Another example is the power that the State, through its institutions such as the Public Health Service, has over minority women's reproductive abilities. Cases of forced sterilization of over 35.3% of the women of child-bearing age in Puerto Rico, 20% of married Black and Mexican-American women under 45, and between 15 and 25% of Native American women again make clear the double oppression of racism and sexism for minority women.

Over hundreds of years, Black, Latin, Asian, and Native American women in the U.S. have fought on, refusing to be crushed by the racism and sexism that have constantly been their fare. They have held their families together with strength, love, and courage, and enabled traditions and cultures to be passed on from one generation to the next.



THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Women's movements have developed periodically in the U.S. But they have never been based on an understanding of the class contradiction of society, nor understood the interrelationship of sexism and racism for minority women.

For example, a self-conscious women's movement arose in the late 1800's and early 1900's, and led a struggle for equal rights for women. However, by limiting its concern to winning the right of women to vote, it did not address the most pressing needs of the majority of working class and minority women -- decent wages and working conditions, and an end to racism. This movement dissipated after suffrage was achieved in 1921. Women won the right to vote, but the class in power who benefited from and perpetuated women's oppression through their ownership and control of the economy, the media, and the State apparatus, remained in power. Although they had won the right to vote, women remained powerless because this women's movement was unable to identify and attack the root of women's oppression.

Similarly, in the 1960's, a women's movement re-emerged with the dominant perspective of winning equality for women through legal reforms and with emphasis on equal opportunities within the existing context of capitalist society. This women's movement has made many positive contributions to the struggle for women's liberation. It has raised the level of consciousness in general about the oppression and exploitation of women. It has helped weaken or destroy old myths about women, and it has exposed many male chauvinist ideas and attitudes. It won the right to abortion on demand.

However, it has not made the needs of working class and minority women a priority. The failure of such a limited

definition of women's liberation has been obvious. After more than 10 years since the latest upsurge of women's consciousness of their oppression in the U.S., statistics show that economically, women's position is getting worse. In 1974 (the last statistically complete year), men's earnings exceeded women's by 75%, according to a Labor Department report. Only 5% of the workers earning more than \$15,000 a year in 1974 were women, although women made up 32% of the full-time labor force. Women, especially minority women, are still concentrated in the poorest paying sectors of the economy, with only about 12% of the more than 34 million women workers covered by union contracts. Women are among the first to be laid off in times of economic crisis.

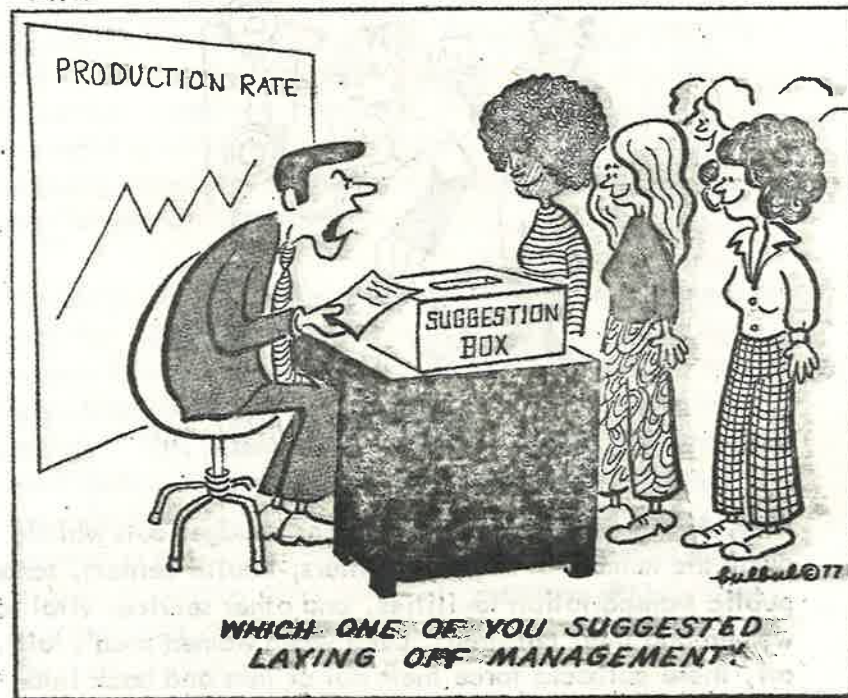


"Our company's policy...
Ladies first..."

And, as the economic crisis deepens, budget cuts whittle away the number of daycare centers, health centers, schools, public transportation facilities, and other services vital to women and their children. Even when women aren't laid off, these cutbacks force them out of jobs and back into the home and economic dependence on their husbands or the State. Underlying and supporting these concrete

material discriminations are attitudes of sexism and male chauvinism which still confront women daily in every aspect of their lives.

This latest women's movement has not mobilized large numbers of working-class women, and it has not been able to stem the tide of, much less reverse, women's oppression and exploitation in our society. It has failed to understand that the oppression of women is part of a class system of exploitation, and that ultimately, in challenging the present status of women, we must also challenge the economic system and its State apparatus which demands and reinforces that status.



WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING AGAINST?

Women, as individuals oppressed by sexism, as minority members oppressed by racism, and as part of the working class exploited by capital, have an overriding interest in the elimination of a system based on exploitation.

Sexism seeks to create docile, passive women who will continue to provide free labor in the home and cheap reserve labor for the present labor market. Sexism divides working people, giving false illusions of status and power to men, and making men and women perceive their interests differently. In addition, some women, perceiving the reality of their oppression, incorrectly assume that men are inherently their oppressors rather than seeing that male attitudes and behavior are a result of a society that benefits from these attitudes and socializes its children to reflect them. Sexism, like racism, in its reality and in reactions to it, creates divisions. These divisions keep working people apart and prevent us from uniting and understanding that we have a common enemy - the class that has power over all our lives. Sexism and racism are both key ideological underpinnings for the capitalist system, and the main factors dividing the working class today.

Under capitalism, the labor of the majority is used to create profits for the capitalist class. The tools and resources of production are controlled not by the working people, but by a capitalist class which makes up less than 5% of the population. The products of our labor are bought and sold to increase the profits of the ruling class.

Capitalism, when challenged forcefully by those it oppresses, can and will make certain concessions to try to maintain the

equilibrium of its system. These concessions usually affect only a small number of people. A smokescreen of greater "opportunities" is used to mask perpetuation of the true conditions of oppression for the majority of people.

Couldn't capitalism provide more than just concessions to women? Theoretically, couldn't sexism be eradicated in a country like the U.S. without a revolutionary change in its economic system? Many women compare their lives to their mothers' lives and see enormous changes in expectations and opportunities for women. They see more women as doctors, lawyers and executives, more women running for political office, women at military academies and on police forces, and increasing media images which show women not in the kitchen but as "career women" or "liberated singles." Therefore they assume that women can achieve real equality now in the United States.

However, these changes have by no means won women's liberation. They merely reflect the increasing participation of a small percentage of women in the management and/or protection of a profit-motivated, class-structured society. It is inherent in a class society that only a few compared to the total population can hold such positions, and their ability to do so is determined by their ability to protect the interests of the ruling class. The interests of the ruling class and the interests of the working class are mutually exclusive. Therefore protecting ruling class interests is always at the expense of the working class which creates the wealth appropriated by the privileged few.

In a society based on profit and exploitation, human relations will always be reduced to commodities. Sex too will remain a commodity to be bought and sold, and women will continue to turn to prostitution as a way of making a living. The degradation and exploitation of women will continue to affect the lives and self-image of all women - rich or

poor. A woman, just because she is a corporate president, is no more able to walk alone in a park at night free from fear of sexual attack. And more importantly, the exploitation of millions of working women who must sell their labor to a boss for his or her private gain will remain as long as they do not participate in determining how the profits they produce are used. It is for this reason that we say that the woman question is a class question.



"The economic situation is improving, gentlemen! The average family can now afford everything except food, clothing and shelter!"

Capitalism, the system based on the exploitation of the many by the few, profits from and perpetuates both the special sexist oppression of women and their general oppression as part of the entire working class. True liberation for women means liberation from both forms of oppression, and cannot be achieved without the seizure of state power by the working class (the proletariat, the class whose labor produces society's wealth), and the subsequent abolition of the private ownership of the means of production.

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

IN THE HOME:

- end to male domination of the home
- end to sexual division of labor
- 24-hour, parent-controlled daycare and afterschool care convenient to jobs and home

ON THE JOB:

- JOBS, to provide women with economic self-sufficiency
- end to sexual discrimination in hiring and job roles
- a living wage, and wage parity with men for equal work
- maternity and pregnancy-related benefits
- paternity leave for fathers

SOCIAL STATUS:

- equal legal rights of husbands and wives
- equal legal and social status for married, single, and gay women
- health and sex education which give women control over their own bodies
- community-controlled health care
- free and equal community-controlled education
- freedom from sexual harrasment
- end to male chauvinism

The above are some prerequisites for the full and equal participation of women in society. They are all fundamental to women, yet all challenge the whole economic basis for women's roles in capitalist society. Equality for women demands socialism, not capitalism, because what we are really fighting for is power, the right to control our own lives. We have seen how our right to that power and con-



rol is incompatible with capitalism, but how can we be sure that socialism is the answer?

Socialism creates the material base, the pre-conditions, for women's liberation. Sexist and chauvinist attitudes are deeply entrenched in our society and will not be eliminated overnight. While socialist revolution is not a guarantee of women's liberation, it is a necessary pre-condition because it replaces private ownership of the means of production with public ownership, and it replaces the capitalists' power over people's lives with workers' power over the profits produced by their labor. This can only be achieved by the seizure of state power from the capitalist ruling class and the establishment of a new state apparatus controlled by the working class.

Once the profit-seeking ruling class is eliminated and a planned economy run for the public interest rather than for private profit is established, society will best be served by the full participation and development of all members of society. There will be nothing to be gained from the exploitation of women, of minorities—both men and women, or of the working class as a whole.

In addition to denying work to vast sectors of the population, capitalism makes those who are working not want to cooperate, not want to work hard, not want to be creative or inventive merely to increase someone else's private gain. With the elimination of exploitation and private profit, the productive powers of society will be freed. The creative potential of women, minorities, and the working class in general will be released. When the productive forces of socialist society have developed to the point where the necessities of life for all can be produced with a minimum of human time and energy, the potential for the creation of a real communist society exists. In such a society, where the necessities of life are easily and efficiently provided to all, people will have greater freedom to explore their creative and productive potential.

Since women will have been active participants in a revolutionary victory, in a socialist society women will also be active participants. They will develop new skills and abilities, and will assume leadership roles in every aspect of society. In turn, the revolutionary movement will have had to develop support structures of daycare and socialization of household functions as the only way to ensure full and equal participation of women in the revolutionary struggle. Once the state, the economy, and social institutions are controlled by the working class, socialization of childcare and housework can be institutionalized.

Today, however, we must develop short-term programs that will begin to develop the long-term understanding of the

need for revolution and the possibility of a different kind of social organization. In fact, it is the struggle to win rights denied under capitalism that develops that understanding and builds the revolutionary movement. To link the fight for true equality for women with the fight for socialism, we must look at women's immediate oppression as well as its causes; we must diagnose the disease but also treat its symptoms.

STRATEGY

What then is a strategy which can address immediate needs, yet maintain a revolutionary perspective; which can focus on attacking the most fundamental aspects of women's oppression essential to capitalism? Only with such a strategy can each immediate victory in a specific area also weaken the capitalist structure and therefore contribute to the complete victory over women's oppression and the victory of socialism over capitalism.

Sexism is economically profitable to capitalism because of the two main social functions women provide: cheap, reserve labor on the job; and the domestic service of rearing, socializing, and maintaining a labor force for capital. Therefore, our day-to-day organizing around women's oppression in the context of fighting capitalism should concentrate around the following areas:

JOB: Productive work and a living wage are basic human needs. We must fight for equal pay and equal upgrading and hiring policies, against layoffs which discriminate unjustly against women workers, for maternity leave, against sexual and racial discrimination on the job, and especially for the organization into unions of unorganized women-workers.



DAYCARE: Total individual responsibility for children's needs denies the general responsibility of society for its future workforce, drains women's capacity for social participation, isolates them in the home from society, and narrows women's perceptions of themselves and of society as a whole. We must make government-financed, parent-controlled daycare a major demand.

These two areas of work are primary. They center on the economic basis for women's oppression, and are the areas most directly challenging to capitalist profits made from women's inferior status in society. But another key area of work must be:

WELFARE: Capitalism has a built-in need for a significant population of unemployed workers. Job competition keeps wages low and the labor force disciplined, and unemployed workers can fill in new job openings if an area of the economy expands. Because the battle for jobs and daycare enabling all women to work will be an ongoing one, we must see that the victims of unemployment and their families do not suffer. We should therefore support the organization of welfare recipients, the demand for sufficient stipends and non-harrasing regulations, the right to simultaneous job-training or education, and essentially that welfare be regarded as a right, not a "charity."

In addition to the three key areas outlined above, there are innumerable other possible areas of work which challenge women's oppression. Some of these are the right to abortion; prevention of sterilization abuse; sex-education and birth-control for high school women; health facilities which meet the real needs of women and children; against tracking women students into certain courses or areas of work; against rape and sexual harrassment; fighting for the democratic rights of lesbians; against wife-beating; etc. And in every areas of struggle, the special oppression of Third World women, who suffer from the double burden of sexism and racism, must be a part of all organizing tactics and demands.

But women must be mobilized to fight not only against their own oppression and exploitation. Only by women linking their struggles with those of other oppressed groups can a force powerful enough to destroy the common enemy—capitalism—be created. Women must fight against police repression and harrassment, against cutbacks in social services and community programs, and all other examples of capitalist oppression and exploitation. However, capitalism in the U.S. is also part of a world-wide imperialist system of exploitation

and domination. For example, over 80% of the economy of Puerto Rico is controlled by corporations from North America. The same people who control our lives and livelihood in the U. S. keep Puerto Rico underdeveloped and its people exploited and oppressed in the interests of monopoly capital. Therefore women must also join their struggles with the fight against imperialist penetration and control of other countries. They must support struggles for national liberation and self-determination in Puerto Rico, southern Africa, and all other areas of the world.



While women will initiate and lead struggles around many issues directly or indirectly related to women's oppression, this is not just a women's issue. Men must also take up women's struggles, raise the special demands of women, consciously examine political and social issues and activities in terms of their relation to women, actively struggle against sexism and male chauvinism in themselves and in other men, and take an equal share of home and childcare responsibilities.

ORGANIZATION

Many women have experienced forms of organization that were oppressive and hindered personal growth and political development. Such experiences have caused many to negate the need for organization of any kind. Yet, it is only through the strength of organization that women can achieve a sense of their own power and ensure the continuation of the movement over time. Working individually, we can have only a limited impact in our fight for women's equality. While we must fight all forms of sexism and male chauvinism which we encounter in our day-to-day living, we must also develop specific forms of organization to carry out our struggle effectively.

There are four main levels of organization. At the most basic level, there must be support structures for women who are beginning to examine and change their roles in the home and workplace. Consciousness-raising groups and women's study groups can be important preliminary aids in understanding the political nature of women's oppression, and in overcoming the isolation and self-blame many women experience as they question formerly-held assumptions about their lives.

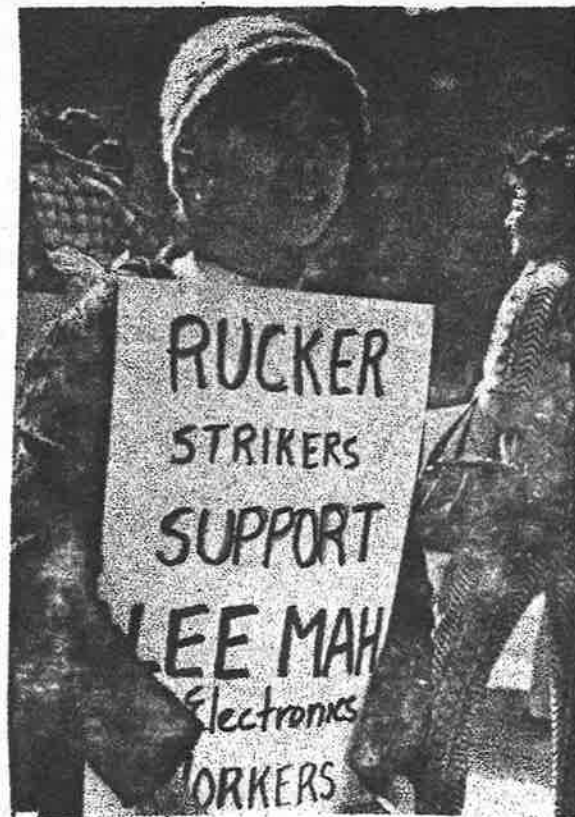
Second, women with heightened political awareness can work within organizations around specific issues, to ensure that women's special demands are included within the more general ones. Rank and file caucuses, community groups, organizations of welfare recipients, student groups, etc. should all take up the particular needs of women as a basic principle of unity. This means that besides addressing women's issues per se, meeting times must be set to accommodate women and childcare should be provided when necessary. It may also be necessary to form women's caucuses within certain organizations to consolidate women's political impact and guarantee that their collective voice be heard. Women should be encouraged to develop leadership skills and the

entire organization should come to understand the nature of sexist exploitation and oppression.

On a third level of work, politically committed women need to build a mass women's organization capable of fighting for the democratic rights of women. Its scope would be wide-ranging, and would include work around as many of the areas listed previously as possible. The political effectiveness of an independent women's movement rests on its class composition, the class perspective of its programs, and the revolutionary understanding of its leadership. An organization like the National Organization of Women (NOW), made up mostly of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women, because of the class composition of its members and their identification with the capitalist state, tends to work only for reforms of limited impact. A predominantly working class organization with Marxist-Leninist leadership will fight for the fundamental rights of the vast majority of women in the United States and will understand the need for far-reaching social change. For this reason, the independent women's movement would form an integral part of a united front, working together with the labor movement, oppressed nationalities, progressive student groups, and other organizations to present united opposition to the system of monopoly capitalism which exploits and oppresses us all. Only the seeds for an independent women's organization exist in the U.S. today. But many local forms of women's organizations such as women's centers, women's unions, etc. are providing needed experience and understanding of correct organizational strategy.

The highest level of organization through which women can unify the struggle for women's liberation is within a communist party. Only through the revolutionary leadership of a party can the struggle against women's oppression draw strength from, and add force to, the revolutionary struggle for socialism. Women must participate in building and strengthening this party because it cannot provide revolutionary leadership

to women's struggles and seriously confront the sexism and male chauvinism so embedded in our society unless women are fully a part of the process of party development and help to provide its leadership.



The role of such a vanguard party is to be an organized force in political struggle as well as to provide leadership to political movements for social change. A vanguard can summarize lessons learned from past practice, help focus present efforts, and plan future strategy. As different forces in our society become organized and recognize the connec-

tions between their struggles, there will be the need for a force that can integrate, give direction to, and consolidate these groups into a cohesive, fighting whole under working class leadership. Such is the role of the party.

As we have suggested, many types of organizations will be necessary to effectively struggle for women's liberation. Their internal structures will vary depending on the nature and purpose of the group. But whatever the structure, they must clearly define the basis for leadership, how it can be developed within the organization, and how it is held accountable to the organization as a whole. The women's movement has properly raised the question of elitism and authoritarianism in organizations. In all levels of organization, leadership must be broadly developed and held responsible and accountable to the organizations and their members.

CONCLUSION

But even with an economic transformation to socialism, old ideas and habits inherited from the exploitative system of capitalism hang on. In the U.S., we must not ignore that all of us, women as well as men, have absorbed the social, cultural, and ideological forms of sexism which have developed since the emergence of private property in primitive society. Socialist revolution will eliminate the basis for women's exploitation by eliminating the private profit basis of capitalist society and replacing it with a system geared to use the wealth created by society to meet people's needs. But an oppressive sexist ideology will not automatically be eliminated because of that transformation. For this reason, the special demands of women must be continually addressed

within the workers' struggle towards socialism and long afterwards.

In all areas of work and in all organizations, we must combat the ideological forms of women's oppression that we find in ourselves and in each other: inherited attitudes and stereotypes about men's and women's roles. All areas of work, too, should seek to connect the immediate issue and struggle to the overall perspective, i.e. to expose its roots in class society, and to connect today's demands with the ultimate demand for revolution - the prerequisite for women's liberation.



POSTSCRIPT

We do not see this paper as the definitive statement on women's liberation. Many areas not fully explored are still areas of serious concern, such as an analysis of: the family; the oppression of Third World women; lesbian oppression; the role of the myriad institutions of the State in the oppression of women. These areas are not necessarily less important to a theory of women's liberation than those explored in the paper. Rather, their omission reflects the limitations of our practical and theoretical experience. But by distributing what we have developed thus far, we hope to enter into debate and discussion with others and to test our analysis in practice. In so doing, we can deepen our understanding, sharpen our focus, expand our analysis, and increase our political effectiveness.

We welcome the opportunity for dialogue and debate around the points raised in this paper.

WHO WE ARE

The Worker-Student Organizing Collective (WSOC) is a Marxist-Leninist organization based in New York City. We have engaged in organizing in workplaces, against cutbacks in NYC, within the women's movement, in international solidarity movements, and on campuses. Other WSOC publications include "Principles of Unity," "Cutbacks in NYC," "The Trade Union Movement: A Marxist Analysis." All pamphlets can be ordered by mail for 50¢ each. For more information about WSOC, contact us at:

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