

December 5, 1979

Dear Steering Committee Comrades,

We would like to propose a beginning process for sharing and coordinating theoretical development as well as practical work summations on the special oppression of women.

We view work around women to be of particular importance in this period for several

reasons: economic constriction has resulted in steadily deteriorating working conditions and a widening gap in wages in relation to men;

increasing cutbacks in social services are further reducing the quality and availability of child care services all at a time when more than 50% of women with young children are working;

the Right Wing assault has focused on the gains and goals of the women's movement (in particular using opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and the ERA) as a basis for gaining political support;

and finally, the racist and class bias of the women's movement both currently and historically, not only prevents it from effectively countering the Right Wing attack, but also prevents it from providing class conscious leadership to working class and minority women.

Our position is that work around women is secondary in importance to anti-racist work. But we don't interpret this to mean no work. Quite the contrary: unless work around women is carried on within the context of an anti-racist and working class perspective it will neither move forward nor be capable of attracting advanced minority women who by virtue of triple oppression are in the best position to provide anti-racist, proletarian leadership. Within the Trend in general and within the OCIC in particular, we are not aware of how much work is being done around women's issues (and even less aware of theoretical developments) with a M-L perspective.

We suggest the first step to be investigation of work being done around the special oppression of women. If this investigation has already been done, then the second step could be a systematic exchange of practical summation and developing theoretical work. The third step would be a mini-conference of those engaged in this work to share lessons from practice and guide theoretical work. (DSC has developed a perspective we use to guide our work and planning for such a conference would help us and hopefully others to concretize these orientations).

A secondary goal of the conference would be to help identify and struggle against sexism manifested within the OCIC as well as in practical work situations. As evidenced by the number and positions of women within the OCIC, sexism is not at a level that would prevent active participation by women, again reiterating that the struggle against sexism is secondary to the struggle against racism--but nevertheless still a struggle.

One concrete example of the effects of sexism, is the resistance by many women to political summations and theoretical development. Many women are intellectually passive and perceive themselves to be incompetent in developing theory. It is possible that this is a contributing factor to the limited theoretical work being done on the Woman Question by Marxist-Leninist women. We hope that this three step process can be one way of beginning to deal with this problem.

We would like the Steering Committee to respond to whether his proposal is timely or whether it might prove disruptive to other OCIC work. With the support of the Steering Committee, DSC is prepared to initiate the investigation (initially via a questionnaire). Based on the responses, exchange of information could be coordinated with those most developed in their work then initiating plans for the conference (questionnaire to be circulated February - March; exchange of information May - June; conference early 1981). If this proposal conflicts with other OCIC plans please project a more feasible timetable. We would also appreciate hearing about any additions or criticisms.

In Struggle,

Detroit Socialist Collective

April 7, 1980

Dear DSC comrades,

The SC was able at our Dec. SC meeting to take up your Dec. 5th letter and proposal around work on the special oppression of women. We know you put a lot of work into writing the letter, so we want to respond to it as fully and concretely as possible. Also, since your concerns are probably shared by others in the OC, we would like to circulate your letter and our response to it within the OC at large.

First, I would like to take up the part of your proposal that we disagreed with. We disagree with that part that calls for a secondary goal of a mini-conference being identifying and struggling against sexism within the OCIC. We also disagree with that part of your proposal that implies we should take up theoretical work around the oppression of women at this time. Such is suggested by your opening sentence, "We would like to propose a beginning project for sharing and coordinating theoretical development..." and by the fact of your writing the SC, since if you were just suggesting coordination around practical work, there would be no reason to write the SC. In essence, part of your letter and proposal puts forth that the OC's basic agenda in the coming year include taking up the struggle against sexism in a significant way- understanding it theoretically and how it's manifested in the OC.

We disagree for 2 reasons- 1 general, and 1 particular. The main reason is that the OCIC as a whole has already agreed upon its agenda, its primary task, that are before us in the coming period-- outlined in the "OC's 1st year" and agreed upon in the form of a resolution at the national conference. Many of us in the OC are eager to take up theoretically particular important questions we face as a class and party-building movement--whether it is the woman question, the gay question, the nature and history of revisionism. Our desires may come from particular oppression we face, understanding the importance of the question, particular problems or concerns we face in our locality, theoretical work our local organization has done, etc. (For instance, the writer of this letter is very eager to take up the struggle against sexism theoretically.) However, all of us have to subordinate our particular concerns to what the collective body as a whole--the OCIC--has come to understand and agree upon as those theoretical tasks that are most critical, primary to moving our party-building movement forward at this time in history.

After all, the essence of what the OC and IC is all about is prioritizing our theoretical tasks and then focusing the entire tendency's theoretical resources and attention on them-- to develop revolutionary theory around them, i.e. the correct political line on the question. So for this coming period we have agreed that some of the priorities are: uniting our tendency around a plan for forging a single ideological center; deepening our understanding of ultra-leftism; deepening our grasp of the centrality of racism; consolidating around the 18 principles of the OC. For anyone to

put forward another task that competes with our agreed upon agenda, as it seems you have, is reflective of a circle spirit, failing to subordinate what is a key agenda item in your understanding, for whatever reasons, to the OCIC's agenda at large.

In particular, we disagree with this part of your proposal, because although you verbalize a few times that the struggle against sexism is secondary to the struggle against racism, your proposal objectively negates that. This part of your proposal objectively reflects lack of consolidation, deep understanding of the centrality of racism and why it's a priority of the OC to take it up in a serious theoretical way before taking up the struggle against sexism in a serious theoretical way.

Why do we say this? When we talk about the centrality of racism, we're talking about how racism is central, key in holding back all areas of our work--in the class, in the party-building movement, etc. This letter is not the place to go into all the ways racism holds back our work in the class struggle. But it should be vividly clear to all of us in the OC how racism in the most central division holding back party-building movement and the OC in particular; everything from the proportion of national minorities at the OC conference, to the errors of racism made not only at the OC conference but subsequently. Many of us, including this writer, are just beginning to understand the depths of our own white chauvinism.

All of this shows what a long way we have to go in deepening our understanding theoretically of racism and how it is manifested among us. We have hardly begun to take up a serious struggle against white chauvinism in our local and regional areas, let alone deepening our theoretical understanding of racism. And yet you are proposing in this coming period having part of a national conference on how sexism is manifested in the OC! Do you see how objectively this part of your proposal shows a weak consolidation around the centrality of racism and how sexism is secondary to it, especially in relation to the OC?

The OC's decision,--not to put the woman ? on our theoretical agenda for this coming year--however, does not mean liquidating the struggle against sexism. We, the SC, very much think, as you've said, that for all of us to really deepen our understanding and struggle against racism, does not mean liquidating the struggle against sexism. (In the final analysis, we all have to look at whether the practice of the SC and OC at large reflects this understanding.) We agree that the struggle against sexism and the struggle against racism are very interrelated, and that the struggle against sexism is the second most central division in the class and our party-building movement. We agree that there have definitely been weaknesses around sexism within the OC, and the SC in particular.

The concrete question is, "How do we take up the struggle against sexism, i.e. not liquidate it, while our focus within the OC is on the struggle against racism? The problem is that some forces in our tendency have the mistaken idea that the only way to take up the struggle against sexism at this time necessitates an in-depth study of the woman question. Obviously, before too long, we surely have to take up this question theoretically; it's a real

weakness of our movement that so little revolutionary theory around the oppression of women has been developed. But since the theoretical understanding of racism is 1st on the OC's agenda, in the meantime we see 3 ways to push forward the struggle against sexism:

1) Encouraging forces within the OC and tendency at large to get together and coordinate their practice in the class taking up the struggle against sexism. That's why we support that part of your proposal that wants to initiate communication and coordination among forces doing common practice around the oppression of women, like around ERA, pro-abortion, anti-sterilization, Women Employed work, etc. It's important to begin to sum-up this practice to help in the future development of revolutionary theory around sexism.

2) Encouraging everyone in the OC to raise criticisms of sexism any time they occur within the OC at large or the NSC. These criticisms should be written up, popularized, and circulated throughout the OC as a way to heighten OC members consciousness around sexism. As pointed out in the presentation on the NSC at the OC national conference, there were examples of sexism within the SC and in the Southern region that were criticized but not written up for circulation among the OC members. This has been a weakness that needs to be corrected, even though our primary focus will be popularizing examples of racism. But everyone has the responsibility to raise a criticism of sexism if they think that's what's going on. And where errors of sexism dovetail with errors of racism like with national minority women, that should be brought out.

3) Paying special attention to the development of women's leadership within the OC. This is the responsibility of everyone in the OC, but particularly those in leadership of the OC at the national, regional, and local level. This has 2 main aspects. One is paying special attention to the theoretical development of women in the OC. We very much agree with what you said in your letter about women perceiving themselves as incompetent theoretically. A failure to pay special attention to the theoretical development of women is a sexist error of abstract equality in not recognizing the historic oppression of women. This was a weakness on the SC last year. It is being corrected primarily by putting more emphasis on having thorough collective theoretical discussion around questions before the NSC, secondarily by having special independent study plans for women and national minorities. Similar efforts should be made on the regional and local level for national minorities and women. Developing women theoretically is key in building women comrades' confidence, a key aspect of sexism holding them back.

The other main way to help develop OC women's confidence and leadership is by giving very concrete feedback, both positive and negative, on the work women do within the OC. Criticisms help overcome weaknesses holding back that comrade, and support for good work done builds confidence. A failure to give women feedback is sexist in that it fails to understand the extent to which women are held back by the lack of confidence. A particular tendency we have to struggle against within the OC is paternalism towards women, like minorities, i.e. expecting any less of women and

minorities than we do of white men in the OC. We have to especially guard against the sexist error of underestimating women's ability to take sharp criticism and struggle to change. Paternalistic pats on the back only hold women and national minorities back when we know they are capable of doing much more.

So these are the things we think can be done to take up the struggle against sexism in the OC in this coming period while maintaining our primary focus--in keeping with the OC's agenda--on deepening our understanding of the centrality of racism. But what specifically can you do? Obviously, it's your responsibility, as everyone in the OC's, to make sure that the latter 2 ways of taking up the struggle against sexism are done, even if the NSC has a special responsibility here.

And as said above, we agree with that part of your proposal which deals with investigating who in the OC is doing work around the special oppression of women, organizing a systematic exchange of practical summations, and calling together a conference of those engaged in this work... Any OC group can take the initiative in calling together tendency forces engaged in a common area of practice-- for either ongoing communication, a 1-shot conference, or building an ongoing fraction that will develop strategy and tactics to guide that area of practice. The SC encourages such initiatives because we think they have an important role to play in party-building.

However, as laid out in previous SC minutes, such conferences, fractions are autonomous of the SC and OC--meaning the SC or OC at large will not discuss or guide their work, since the OC is not a center for directing practice. It seems like you should have this understanding of fractions, given your active role in two tendency fractions; so we did not understand why you were asking support from the SC for this part of your proposal. Nevertheless, regarding this aspect of your proposal, we welcome and encourage you or others taking initiative in calling together tendency forces involved in taking up the struggle against sexism within the class, especially given the critical importance of this struggle.

I would like to make a few comments about your investigation (via a questionnaire), however, before mentioning one other thing you could do in taking up the struggle against sexism. From the survey questionnaire done a year ago, I found out what OC and some tendency forces were doing in terms of work around the oppression of women. I can send that information to you. (As you may recall from the "Initial Sum-up of OC forces", it is a clear area of weakness in the OC.) But since that sum-up is outdated now, i.e. new OC forces may have started or done more work around women, like the ERA, there is value in doing a new questionnaire.

I might add, though, that the in-depth investigation and questionnaire, that everyone in the OC at our 1st conference thought was very important to do, had a pretty detailed set of questions on how comrades were taking up the struggle against sexism in the class and in their organization. If you and most others in the OC had answered this questionnaire, due a year ago, we would be a lot further in our understanding of where OC forces are in the struggle against sexism, as well as other struggles.

That was precisely the value of the in-depth questionnaire; and if it were done there would not be the need to send out 5 different questionnaires every time a particular concern arose.

Now to the last suggestion of what you might do, given your interest and concern in theoretical work around women's oppression. A particularly important theoretical question that has to be addressed is the special oppression of national minority women- who face both racism and sexism. A contribution you, or others, would make within the context of our theoretical work around racism in this coming period is to do some theoretical work around the special oppression of national minority women. This leads me to the final thing we wanted to raise in this letter- some criticisms of racism in your letter.

First, in relation to the above, you mentioned but did not draw out or identify as a particularly important theoretical question the special oppression of national minority women. But more important and serious was the white blindspot on your part indicated by the statement in your letter that "the Right Wing Assault has focused on the gains and goals of the women's movement... It's very true that an important aspect of the right-wing attack has been on the democratic rights of women. But you didn't even mention the attack on the democratic rights of national minorities, which clearly has been more the focus of right-wing attacks. Look at Bakke and Weber--the struggle came down around right-wing racist reaction and attacks on the rights of national minorities to have educational and job opportunities. Look at Proposition 13--who did it come down hardest on--national minorities--and what was the main ideology underlying it? racism. And how did Rizzo get to power? using racism? And, yes, there's been an increase in sexist violence, but is it comparable to the increase in racist violence, like the KKK?"

In fact, one of the reasons we talk about the centrality of the struggle against racism, and why it's more central than sexism, is that racism is the cutting edge and ideological backbone of reactionary or right-wing movements. (Just as it is the ideological pillar for imperialism.) Your white blindspot and failure to see this in the particular recent right-wing attacks, and probably in general, is a reflection of your lack of consolidation around the centrality of racism.

We hope this response answers your questions and helps you, and all of us, move forward. I apologize for the delay in responding. The original draft was written 2 months ago, and I'm just getting around to sending you the final draft!

Comradely,
Toni Vlasits
 Toni Vlasits
 for the NSC.