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WHAT KIND OF WOMENS' MOVEMENT?

All of us are here tonight because we are trying to understand the best way to fight women's oppression. It's an oppression which is multi-dimensional and total: we meet it everywhere -- on the streets, in the factories and offices, in the schools, in the kitchens and bedrooms. It is institutionalized by the legal system, by the churches, by all the organized morality of a capitalist society, which finds our oppression a very profitable one indeed -- from the low wages we are paid on the job, to the domestic labour we perform at home.

We feel our oppression everywhere, but it does have a fundamental root: the sole responsibility of the female sex for the rearing of children - in other words, for the reproduction of labour power - in a society where we perform the work and the ruling class reaps the benefits. In this situation, the family becomes women's prison. A strategy for the liberation of women must be able to answer the critical question: how can we free women from their role today, and make it a social responsibility? Selma James and the sisters who share her orientation do not provide an answer to that question.

TODAY MORE THAN EVER.....

The Liberal government has just introduced wage controls - their most visious attempt to date to make the working class pay for the capitalist economic crisis. Women are going to be hit very hard by this move. As the lower paid workers, their wages will be calculated on a percentage of what they earn. This means that they will have no possibility to even catch up to others. And most women don't even belong to unions which could resist the controls. How does James' position on abstention from work and attacks on the unions deal with this problem? In terms of women's second job - in the home - they will suffer more as well. Less money means more work - making ends meet requires a tremendous amount of energy. And wages for housework won't solve this either.

In fact, there are many capitalist governments now considering paying women to stay at home - most notably in Germany. They propose to pay women one third of a worker's wage to stay at home, so that German industry can continue to use cheaper immigrant labour. In Toronto, this is also being considered as a way to avoid providing daycare facilities. Women would continue to be relegated to the home, struggling on a pittance.

DO WAGES REALLY EQUAL POWER?

We don't think so. If that were true, we wouldn't be living in an oppressive, exploitative capitalist society. Does the auto worker have power because of his wages, or the teacher because of hers? No - their power lies in their collective ability to fight for better wages and for social change. And that power is galvanized in the trade unions and political organizations -- again the brunt of James' attack.

Its quite true -- there are huge problems of sexism and reformism in these organizations. But we can't overcome these problems by ignoring the organizations. We can't afford to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The answer is to fight to overcome these problems. Abstention from work in and with the trade unions and the revolutionary left is a means of leaving women isolated in the home and without the vehicles to struggle for their liberation.

It also begs another crucial question: who are the allies of the women's movement and how will we forge those alliances if we have no way of working with other workers and oppressed people who also want real change?

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?

We want to see the day when women will no longer be confined to the domestic role - and pay in low wages, sexual objectification and repression for that role. We want to see the day when society takes responsibility for its own reproduction through high quality childcare, through socialized laundries, through high quality food services - through the socialization of domestic labour. Without this, no amount of equal education, legal adjustments or even equal wages could bring about women's liberation. (As we can see when we look at the Soviet Union, for example.)

It's pretty obvious that a capitalist government isn't about to make these changes. It's not even willing to give women abortions! But Wages for Housework's approach doesn't at all tell us how we're going to get there either.

WHAT KIND OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT?

We need a women's movement which can take up a whole series of women's issues without subordinating most of them to one question - as Wages for Housework does. We need a women's movement which can structure itself democratically to include all those willing to fight for women's liberation - not a grouping which identifies only itself as the movement - again a problem with Wages for Housework. We need a women's movement which has a real strategy for uniting with others also fighting for a better society. We need a women's movement which is active in the work-place, in the schools, in the communities.

In addition to the key demands - for abortion, for childcare, for equal pay - we can also begin today to fight for the beginning of the socialization of domestic labour. We can, for example, demand that employers provide laundries at the place of work for work clothes, that hot, quality meals be provided, that childcare facilities be established for women workers.

A women's movement which takes up these question and begins to develop our struggles and relate to other movements of the oppressed will put us on the right road to our liberation.