

Presentation for In Struggle! (Rita Chudnovsky)

The topic of this workshop is not new, It's been debated in many forums over the last years. I.S. is very interested in the debate among feminists and communists on the question of socialism and women's liberation. There are 3 questions which we see arising again and again and we want to address these as directly as possible, with the understanding that in 10 minutes a lot gets left unsaid.

The three questions are: Who benefits from women's oppression in this society? In other words, are men the enemy?
Should women organise on their own specific demands; that is, should there be an autonomous women's movement?
Does the successful victory of the struggle for women's liberation require a vanguard party struggling for socialism? Can such a party serve the needs of women?

I will address these one at a time, but of course the answers are related.

Who benefits from sexism?

Sexism has been around for thousands of years and permeates our society. The history of women's oppression is another debate, but ... since the rise of the patriarchal family and the development of private property, the work women do--domestic work--has been made into a private service, has been devalued and has kept women isolated.

This leads to particular oppression under capitalism: women are oppressed as women and superexploited as workers. And, this certainly leads to male privilege throughout society.

But, men are not equally privileged, we might say, and the difference between the benefits of sexism to men is greater than the similarities. For one class, sexism is in their fundamental interest, for another it is an utterly false target. That is, the bourgeoisie is the only class that has a fundamental interest in perpetuating sexism. The ruling class benefits in two main ways: in the immediate profits it receives from superexploitation of women workers AND in the division amongst the working masses caused by sexism. Men in the exploited and oppressed classes do not gain from women's oppression in either of these ways.

The capitalist system is motivated totally by commodity production and the lust for profits. The overwhelming majority of the peoples of the world are exploited for those profits and have absolutely no interest in maintaining this system,

To the degree that working class men buy the line that women are the cause of their problems, or that their male privilege is any guarantee against their own exploitation and oppression, they have bought a lie! A lie that keeps real unity, based on equality, from becoming possible. Certainly, the bourgeoisie knows this, and so fosters divisions among the people--not only sexism, but racism, nationalism, agism and so on. Privileges are granted to certain sections of the people to maintain division.

Male privilege and sexism in the working class and amongst the people must be understood in this way. Not accepted, excused or unchallenged, but understood so that it can be fought. Fundamentally, different strata are all oppressed in all areas of their lives: at work, at home, through their bodies and minds.

An increasing number of the most conscious male workers are beginning to realise this. Examples abound where men have supported the struggles of women, whether in the early history of the modern workers' movement in the creation of International Women's Day, or closer to home on the Kenworth picket line and the support given in trade unions to resolutions on sexual harassment, violence against women, abortion rights, equal pay etc.

To sum up briefly: the bourgeoisie is our main and fundamental enemy;
 all the oppressed peoples of the world, including men, are our potential allies;
 the unity we must build with our allies must be based on the struggle against chauvinism in all its forms--it must be a unity between equals.

Should women organise around their own demands?

YES! If this answer surprises you, it needs some explanation. I.S. supports the struggles of the women's movement. Based on criticisms from that movement, and our own members and supporters, we have evaluated our work on the question of women's liberation.

This evaluation shows us that, although our program put forward correctly the need to struggle for women's liberation ("the complete equality of men and women..." is the goal), our practice manifested a CHAUVINIST line, in several ways.

First, we did not give the question the attention it deserves, make it enough of a priority in relation to its actual importance in the struggle for socialism. We were inconsistent in our activity around the immediate demands and the long-term interests of women in the class struggle.

Secondly, and this is a key point, we made our differences with bourgeois feminism (seeing men as the enemy) take on too much importance--we acted as if this was the key obstacle to women's liberation. While we still disagree with the analysis of this group of feminists, it is CHAUVINISM, including how it is manifested within the working class itself, which is the chief obstacle to the emancipation of women, and it is chauvinism which we must wage the struggle against mainly.

Our past practice has been based on a sectarian point of view and we make a frank self-criticism on this. WE WERE NOT APPLYING THE COMMUNIST PROGRAM ON THIS QUESTION.

It is legitimate for women to organise on their own basis, to put forward specific demands, to caucus as a means to encourage the better participation of women in their trade unions and mass organisations.

Do we need a vanguard party?

The answer to this question is very closely related to the first one.

As communists, we believe that capitalism is fundamentally rotten and oppressive. The situation of women in this society illustrates quite clearly that capitalism intervenes in all aspects of our lives. The change required in order to win the real liberation of women cannot happen within a system which turns people, their emotions, sexuality, their labour and their bodies into commodities.

So, while there can and will be victories for the just struggles of people around their immediate demands, only the overthrow of the whole system through socialist revolution can create the conditions whereby these victories can be guaranteed by the rule of the majority of the people. This is because, as history shows us, each victory won must be defended and fought for again and again. Abortion rights are a vivid example of this.

So, we conclude that an autonomous women's movement, just like any mass movement of people fighting around their oppression and their own just demands, cannot alone bring about liberation: it simply isn't radical enough.

Communists are not dreamers. We know socialism will not automatically win the liberation of women, nor does a revolution guarantee there will not be setbacks in the struggle for socialism, and eventually communism (the classless society). The Soviet and Chinese experiences prove this is not so.

But, only a system which eliminates private property, which organises domestic labour, and all labour, as a social activity in the interests of the people, which has the majority of the people in control, can create the conditions for us to break down the final barriers to equality between men and women.

To build such a system requires that we overcome our divisions and build a solid unity of the whole working class and all oppressed peoples. And this unity must be organised in a party, around a program. In Struggle! is trying to build such a party.

To the degree that such a party fights against the chauvinism in its own ranks and fights against the chauvinism in the class it can serve the interests of women. And it is for the masses of women to judge if the party does that.

On our organisation

In summary, I want to return briefly to the self-criticism we are making. We don't think these problems in our work will be solved overnight, but we are taking a more active role in participation in the women's movement and are working on a more regular basis around women's specific demands.

For example, not only are we active in the CCCA, but we have promoted resolutions on the struggle for abortion in trade unions where we are active in order to win more workers to this fight. We have supported Rape Relief in their outreach to gain support for their work and have taken resolutions to trade unions on the issue of violence against women and in support of Rape Relief. We are helping with the campaign of Sandra Lovelace, a native women fighting the loss of her rights and status as a native Indian because she married a white man. In Quebec, we are active in the province-wide day-care movement. We call for the inclusion of people's democratic rights in the new "made in Canada" constitution: including an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation and measures respecting the complete equality of men and women.

Internally, we are taking up the struggle against our own chauvinism, by taking measures to ensure the full participation of women, their views and their concerns. We are encouraging our members to meet and discuss the problems of women--and this is the concern of ALL of our members and supporters.