



## PAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

When we began looking around ourselves, as women, one of the main things we discovered was the home, the family structure as a place of specific exploitation of our labour power. In our analysis we must therefore give first place to this 'private sphere', these domestic walls outside which Marxist class analysis---not to mention the practical activity of the left political organizations and out of parliament---stops. Inside the home we have discovered our invisible work, the enormous quantity of work that women are forced to perform every day in order to produce and reproduce the labour force, the invisible---because unpaid---foundation upon which the whole pyramid of capitalist accumulation rests.

This work, which consists of having children and taking care of them, feeding a man, keeping him tidy and cheering him up after work, is never presented as such. It is presented as a mission whose fulfillment enriches the personality of the one who carries it out. A woman is a mother, a wife, a daughter, she is loved only if she is willing to work without crumpling in the service of others for hours and hours, Sundays, holidays, and nights. This labour relationship is seen always and only in personal terms: it is a personal affair between a woman and the man who has the right to appropriate her labour. It is continually explained to the woman that her world is the family and not society; within the family, therefore, she must express the contradictions involved in the division of labour between men and women, which society imposes on her. The housewife has always been excluded from working class organisations: so all she can do is look for individual solutions.

As an individual, for instance, she has had to confront continual price increases. When her man's wages are no longer enough for meat she substitutes potato souffle---which is equally nourishing but takes another hour of work; or she goes to markets and butcher shops far from home to save a few pence on the housekeeping. Inflation is a weapon used by the employers to cancel out wage rises won by the workers. Women, isolated in their homes, have had to bear the main brunt of inflation in terms of more work. Traditional labour movement organisations must share the blame for this fact, which has been a grave source of weakness for the workers' struggle itself.

The material bond that pins us to this work is our dependence on a man's wage. This wage not only pays for many hours of his direct labour---it also commands other work---that of a woman in the domestic 'factory'---which revolves around that wage. The wealth created is distributed to women through a man's work if at all. On this basis a stratification is created among women. This is wrongly interpreted as a real class distinction whereby a woman's belonging to the working class or the capitalist class is always determined by the man on whom she depends---as if the definition of class as determined by one's position within specific relationships of production were not valid for women as well as men.

True, the woman who can exchange her services for a bigger slice of the income is greatly privileged: a nice house means less work. It means hot water; it means space to separate someone studying from someone else watching television and both from the one who does the washing; it means the children don't get ill from the damp, etc. If there is not enough money to pay a high rent (and they are all high) it is the woman who has to work like mad every day to put something resembling a full meal on the table, to dress her children so they don't look too different from the others when there are already so many other things that set them apart. Even so, we say that a housewife is in herself always a proletarian, though her social status varies according to the income of the man she depends on (no one has ever thought that a slave was not a slave if he had a rich master who could guarantee him a higher standard of living than other slaves).

There are very many women who, to escape the curse of inadequate wages and the isolation of their condition, decide to work outside the home as well. But again their responsibility for the "invisible work"---the continuance--- of a patriarchal type of production relation---reveals the true face of the "emancipation of women through work". Only a part of this mass of housewives who "choose" double exploitation are taken into production, and then always at

at the lowest levels: the rest are usually not even counted among the unemployed. Many of those who work outside the home serve as nurses, secretaries, servants; like factory women they get the worst and lowest paid jobs. It costs capital nothing to train us for these jobs and assure our ideological loyalty, since the best school for servility is the family.

An outside job never takes away a woman's responsibilities as a housewife. All women working in production know that they do their heaviest work at home, and they cannot defend themselves against this. For that matter, even against outside work they manage to organise only slowly and with enormous difficulty, because outside the factory or office there is another clock to munch: the child to be fetched, the shopping and the washing to be done. Here capital has stepped in to relieve us by inventing the system of part-time work. Through this system capital, without too much bother, secures a double advantage for itself: on the one hand, it makes women serve as an underpaid reserve labour force; on the other hand it continues to benefit from free domestic services by leaving the institution of the family intact or even reinforced.

In no case can the woman escape the production relationships determined by the fact that she is a woman in a capitalist society. We are all brought up to be able, as soon as the lack of other women makes it necessary, to carry on producing workers at all costs and without protest. Some begin at the age of 12 (or even before), some go on imagining a bit longer---even till they finish their studies---that they can escape this fate. Some think they can refuse their role at an individual level and some accept it fully at once, only trying not to make too big a mistake in choosing a "master": a bad choice will cost you your life.

The fact that housework is done in a precapitalist or protocapitalist way in no way means that today it is not capitalist and perfectly functional for a phase of capitalist development in which average social productivity, more than factory productivity, is seen as central. Being able to count on this enormous quantity of unpaid labour---just because it maintains the appearance of unproductive labour, to the point of not even being called work---enormously lowers the cost for capital of producing that fundamental merchandise that is labour power. It also means capital can freely manipulate the labour market to suit its cyclic needs: in response to labour agitation it 1) creates a form of unemployment which goes uncontested because the woman expelled from socially organised production always has housework waiting for 2) castrates the workers' capacity for struggle by cutting off or reducing the second family wage.

This will go on as long as housewives continue to function simultaneously as a stratum of the most exploited class and as an element for the containment and control of tensions and conflicts. Prices rise and women face the first consequences; sick people are inadequately cared for and women work to make up for the shortage of medical facilities (before, during, and after treatment); neighbourhoods turn into unlivable ghettos and only women's work can make them bearable. Only women can absorb the lack of schools, shops, green spaces and services in general without rebelling. Only they can mediate between society and members of the family to see that the men don't dismantle the factories and burn up the neighborhoods, to see that the old just grumble and don't go mad, that children don't end up under care and that starvation wages go on feeding the family.

The only thing that can make women accept all this is constant blackmail imposed on them by all means: this is the only way of being a woman, those who rebel are going against their natural role. If one of us feels that she can't manage she is at once made to understand that this is a personal problem which she must solve for herself.

Even the task of assuring the renewal of the labour force, quantitatively and qualitatively, is imposed on women within precise relationships of production. For capital to be able to regulate the flow of workers it is necessary to deprive women of control over their own bodies. This is done by material and ideological instruments whose basic conditions for operation are found within family structure. The capitalist system has always paid much attention to demographic policies as instruments of development, rewarding prolific mothers when "eight million bayonets" were required and sterilising Black women when the uncontrolled growth of the Black proletariat might have

led to explosive situations in the ghettos. It is well known that the only development policy which capitalism has to offer the Third World is birth control.

Maternity is the most effective ideological instrument for controlling women: it is the key by which their total adhesion to the system is obtained. By exalting its ideological aspects and masking its social ones, the myth of maternity as a mission continues to hide from women the reality of their condition. The way women conceive and bear children is not at all natural if compared with developments in other sectors of science (space research, transplants, etc.). In 1970 painful childbirth and the dearth of effective contraceptives are signs of the backwardness to which women are relegated in capitalist development.

Women guarantee not only that labour power will be reproduced in the necessary quantity, but also that it will grow up with qualitative characteristics suited to the development of the capitalist system. Children must be educated, at the most malleable age, for the division of labour; they must at once get it clear in their heads that everyone must sell his or her labour power to survive, and that there is no escape from this curse. The reproduction of the labour force, for the continued effectiveness of capital's blackmail in all its forms, from division by job grading to the exclusion of those who are not productive. Women get the worst of this blackmail; they are always in the lowest job grade, that of a housewife; they are the first to be fired, they have to look after society's rejects on them the ghettos close in.

Through the mother, the child at once learns to accept all this as natural; this is the first step in an apprenticeship which later continues at school, in the propaganda of the mass media, etc.; it is meant to provide an adaptable labour force which will lend itself to the mechanisms of exploitation.

In the acceptance of this division of the labour force between factory and domestic production, in the acceptance of the separation of women from one another and from other exploited people, lies one of the basic reasons for the weakness of working-class organisations.

The most important thing that women have been deprived of is the opportunity to organise against their work. And the left has been partly responsible for this isolation, this lack of opportunity to organise (which is women's real inferiority). It has found theoretical justifications for relegating women's problems to the level of a 'woman question'; in its view such questions are superstructural and thus will be solved by the transformation or revolution of social structures; besides, it says housework is not productive and thus the housewife as such is incapable of struggle, organisation, etc. In the course of the revolution, the left has given exactly the same tasks given them by capital: to feed, keep tidy, and cheer up the revolutionaries, to offer them sexual outlet without too many complications, to bring up the new generation to accept double exploitation as the only possible way to emancipation.

On the basis of this analysis, we must now define the scope and the objectives for women's struggles which can fully express the revolutionary potential which is maturing as women find their position more and more unbearable.

We have already outlined a preliminary answer (in general terms and still to be checked and refined): we've had enough of this work which every day suffocates us, deforms us and blocks all our relationships with outside reality, this work that locks us in a woman's role.

We reject this work and we reject this role. We struggle for all objectives which will reduce our hours of work, which will give us a chance to meet, to organise and increase our strength, which will give us more freedom to start destroying our role in practice.

When we organise to achieve some objective, even a minimal one, we are already in practice rejecting housework: we must go out, we must join with other women, we must discover that our personal problems are everyone's problems and that only together can we find the strength to deal with them.

The cost---which up to now we have borne entirely alone---of running this domestic labour power factory should all be unloaded onto the system.

We want the system to assume the costs of maternity, while we ourselves decide and plan it, because we are sick of having it imposed on us as a 'law of nature' or as a 'variable quantity' within capitalist planning.

We want the system to build/ and pay for nurseries, kindergartens, canteens and centralised cleaning and laundry services, etc.

We want free housing---which means not only removing the rent item from our already meagre budgets. First of all for us it means less work than we have to do today in order to make two rinky rooms into a home for a whole family. We want greenery, gardens and parks in every part of the city--- which means not spending two or more hours a day taking the children out to breathe and play. We want lower prices---which means less work cooking, going to distant markets to save a few pennies, etc.

All this is a wage demand; we want to capture a bigger slice of real wealth ---in terms of houses, green spaces, free services, etc.---compared with that which we manage to pay ourselves today out of a man's wages. And this increased real wealth, this greater availability of goods and services which we demand as the minimum compensation for all the unaid work we have on our shoulders, we intend to enjoy: what we want is not to become more productive, not to go off and be exploited better somewhere else, but to work less and to have more opportunity for social and political experience.

Precisely because of the fight for free social services is already essentially a wage demand, we see no contradiction between this struggle and the struggle based on a demand for direct wages for housework, the work we are doing now and will go on doing even if tomorrow we win our fight for a reduction in hours and workload.

Social services are not the ultimate objective of our struggle: still less do they offer a real alternative to the exploited situation we are immersed in. Even if we get wages for shit work it is still shit work. Moreover such concessions will not be handed us on a platter--- they can only be won by hard fighting at a high level of organisation. And they should be seen as a victory: the conquest of our battleground and better conditions in which to broaden and build our struggle: can we begin to reject our role,---e.g. by not getting married and not having children---when for many of us the only guarantee of income is still a man's wage?

Can we start talking about educational standards, relations between adults and children in this society, if even the bricks and mortar of nurseries do not exist?

Can we have time for autonomous political growth if domestic work continues to eat up 12 hours or more a day and if we cannot get at least part of it done outside the home?

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Once we have pointed out that the wage struggle does not contradict but actually includes the fight for free social services, since these reduce our hours of work, we at once come up against some considerations suggested by the immediate reality of women's condition.

1. The right to be paid for the work one does is something which immediately affects all women: even those who don't figure in the statistics as housewives, even those who are not wives or mothers: the girl living at home who studies or works but who is always expected to "give a hand" at home, the "independent" woman with her own income who sooner or later is lumbered with the care of the old, if nothing else, the elderly woman who wears out the last years of her life looking after the children of a younger woman who is thus "freed" for factory work, the woman whose man is "understanding" and ready to help but always makes it clear that by rights she ought to be doing the work, and so on.

2. The demand for wages is a demand for independence. No matter how many services we manage to win, no matter how much more free time we gain in this way, until we win our own incomes and thus break the bond of economic dependence on a man---whether husband or father---how can we form the relationships we want, decide if we want to get married or not, to have children or not? How can we control our own lives? How many women are unable to leave their husbands today and get divorced tomorrow because, although they have worked all their lives, they cannot support themselves and their children?

3. The demand for wages has in itself a big ideological impact: We are looking at our work in a new way. We have been taught to see that work as an expression of our femininity, in which, we are told, our finest quality--- generosity---is fully expressed in giving others security and serenity. The fact that we now see that work as a socially necessary activity, which must be paid for just like the work our fathers, husbands, and sons do outside the

home is already a big step towards achieving an attitude of detachment, towards destroying that 'naturally' fixed role which society assigns us.

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When we put forward the theme of wages for women, we have in mind certain high points of the class struggle, in and out of Italy. We see the phenomenon---of vaster dimensions in the U.S. but present also in England---of a massive demand for income by whole working class strata---women, white, youths, Blacks---which in the ups and downs of the economic cycle have been sometimes exploited at the lowest levels, and at other times, exelled and pushed aside from the productive process, and which are now fighting this exclusion by a real assault on the agencies of public assistance.

There are 15 million Americans who ought to be getting social security subsistence payments. Since the explosion of public assistance rolls in 1958-59 in the U.S., women without husbands and with children to support have been in the forefront of the fight for wages without a job. To the degree that these women struggled they ceased to perform their function of shock absorbers between the proletariat and the forces of repression. The sociologists noticed the new subversive role of women after the ghetto revolts: they finally discovered that the "authority" of the family over young people was decreasing a rather twisted way of saying that the family no longer stood between these young people and their own interests and struggles.

In Italy, in just this phase of capitalist attack on employment levels, we have seen a series of struggles in the factory for a guaranteed wage (a few examples: Zanussi, Candy, Oréal, Lavestini, and many others). The demand for a guaranteed wage is even advanced, though secondarily, in the platform of the engineering union. The wage demand has also emerged in some strata of the working class which have been hit by restructuring and made redundant. In the student movement the demand for wages, in the indirect form of refusal to pay costs of acquiring skills, has been one of the focal points for mobilisation.

The most interesting data for analysis of the composition of the overall female labour force in Italy are not so much the total numbers (at present only 19% of women "work"); there are probably about 10 million housewives), but rather the figures relating to mobility (according to ISTAT data for 1970 and 71):

48% of women without jobs have left work for family reasons; one million women were fired or exelled from agriculture.

1,600,000 women have had a job in the last five years.

and "Black" work: 1,600,000 domestic workers, of whom the overwhelming majority are women.

What conclusions can be drawn from these summary data?

1. That the "housewife" has probably not always been exclusively a housewife. That a large percentage of the more than 10 million housewives not only have always done and continue to do their "invisible" work, but on top of that they have done and continue to do a second job. A woman goes into a factory and then leaves (either for "family reasons" or because the factory closes) she does seasonal work (see female employment in agriculture, the food industry, canning, etc.), she arranges in a thousand ways to fill out the family income. Even when she can no longer get out of the house she brings the factory home, makes a contract with a middle man and accepts the living death of home-work.

2. That in the "housewife" we can see a figure representing a whole class stratum, who on the whole has already felt the effect of the double job regime on her own skin, and will probably be less and less willing to adapt herself to the cyclic oscillations which today relocate her to the ghetto of the home and which tomorrow will again order her into the factories and offices with a double workload. The current tendency towards increasing expulsion of women workers does not seem likely to reverse itself in the near future. In view of the fact it seems likely that social figure of the housewife who represents an ever-increasing slice of the female population--- can be mobilised much more readily by a demand for wages for the work she already does, a demand for income, than by a generic request to support the Communist Party's full employment policy---to rally herself with a struggle

to defend and extend opportunities to work.

On the other hand, at a time when capital has been forced by workers' struggle to respond in certain areas with inflation or with "stagnation" (drop in investments, reduction of employment), the only way we see of positively affirming the workers' interests is to make capital pay the highest possible cost for unemployment and expulsion: if you don't give us work give us a guaranteed income: if I can't find work outside, pay me for the housework I am forced to do.

Of course, as a demand of marginal strata capital has already taken account of this, in Italy there is Piccoli's proposal for a guaranteed wage for workers made redundant by modernisation. These "concessions" are two-faced: on the one hand they open an area for widening struggle (for example, see the pressure in the U.S. for public assistance funds well beyond the simple unemployment benefit), and on the other they are an attempt to create a welfare ghetto in which to segregate certain strata of workers and set them against those in employment.

This attempt can only be fought by linking the struggles of the unemployed, students, women, and employed workers: Yes, a demand for income, but connected with a drastic reduction in hours for all. When the struggle for a 20 hour week becomes general, even if it is called a struggle for employment, then we'll say OK: we don't see any contradiction between this and the rejection of work. Then we will save---as women---that we intend to bring into that struggle our specific interest in sharing with men all the work and the "joys" of maternity. Only on this material base can the destruction of feminine and masculine roles, and of the institution of the family, become a concrete prospect.

It is precisely within the process of class reintegration that we see the function of a militant feminist movement: because we see not only the division between labourers and technicians, workers and students, white workers and Black (or Southern) workers, but also the more profound and radical opposition of the sexes, as a formidable weapon in the hands of capital for the fragmentation and control of the working class.

We assert that as long as men are set against women by their role as instruments and immediate recipients of women's servile labour, as long as women's unpaid labour works as a brake and a form of blackmail on the capacity for struggle of women and men, the system can be sure of a basic guarantee of equilibrium and a wide margin for manoeuvre to reabsorb the conquests of the working class.

Therefore a period of independent organisation of women, we can't tell for how long, is necessary: we need to win our identity, to define the forms and objectives of our struggle, to assure that these struggles will effectively strike at those mechanisms of stabilisation and equilibrium of the system which only we could discover as fundamentals because only we feel their full negative force in a material way: the family, feminine and masculine roles, procreation. To confirm what we have said observe the wholly ideological and transitory character which the anti-authoritarian theme (criticism in the family, roles, etc) has assumed in the student movement and the new left. Ideological and transitory because materially men get a lot of privileges from these structures and their criticism on this plane cannot be radical; this analysis should be extended to the different theories of non-repressive education and also to so-called sexual freedom. These theories did not come from women and indeed have been finally turned against them, pinning them more effectively to their role; this reveals their substantially conservative character.

In this condition of women today, we have identified some of the most explosive areas of contradiction: we have begun to struggle for wages for housework, to demand an income. This demand is being put forward at a stage when capital is planning increasingly massive reductions in women's employment and thus ever-greater exploitation of women's work. In itself this demand represents a step towards a reunifying the working class: it means setting in motion women's struggles that will weigh massively on the power relationships between the working class and capital.

To those who go on asking us to join them as allies, or worse, as subordinate auxiliaries of already existing organisations, we must reply that not only have they failed to understand the order of the day which we propose as women, as the feminist movement, but they show that they have repressed the new forms of organisation and the opportunities which are emerging from the political level and the new content of workers' and students' struggles in recent years.