

March 31, 1975.

Dear Sisters,

We are sending everyone on the mailing list two statements concerning the recent Montreal conference since after much discussion, two analyses emerged from our group as to the implications of the conference.

The Montreal group is working together well in spite of these differences: we participated in a demonstration of 3,000 people organized by a coalition of day care groups in Quebec; we have sent speakers to meetings at several junior colleges; and we have initiated a debate about Wages for Housework in the McGill Women's Collective Press. We have been interviewed on several radio talk shows; we are working with other groups to form a women's contingent in the annual May Day demonstration (last year 15,000 people marched in Montreal); and our immediate plans include meetings with several other women's groups here in Montreal to discuss the perspective.

By sending out these papers, we hope to initiate discussion in the network on the points raised.

The Power of Women Collective
Montreal

IMPORTANT NOTICES

1. The Newsletter

In Montreal, Reni Jackman took on the job of putting out the newsletter. She would like all material to be in by May 29th. Please let her know before that if you need more than one copy as she has to order paper. Her address is 476 Hyde Street,
Windsor, Ontario,
Canada
519-254-5535.

Our apologies to everyone, Reni in particular, for having delayed the first newsletter by being late with this mailing.

2. The Mailing List

The mailing list is incomplete because one sheet was lost. Please send us all the names and addresses that you know to be missing, as well as new ones that should be added. We will send out a complete list as soon as possible.

Montreal Power of Women Collective.

April 3, 1975

STATEMENT ON THE MONTREAL CONFERENCE

My disagreement with the other Montreal statement stems from the fact that I do think there were political differences between Toronto Group I and the network. The differences came out as clearly at the conference as Group I allowed them to, but they are contained in Toronto Group II's statement and were further spelled out by Peggy from Boston. They are essentially the libertarian position of posing a split between local struggle and international organization; the first being essentially different in each place while the second, ~~is~~ a vanguardist imposition of the same "line". Group II's paper was sent to everyone well in advance with the intent being clearly understood that it was to serve as a basis for a discussion on organization. It was also understood that Group II considered a clarification with Group I to be crucial to their ability to continue working within the same political perspective. We cannot deny that the history of differences in political theory and practice ~~and~~ clearly spelled out there, and we cannot deny that if indeed Group I held these ideas and practiced politics as stated, there is no room for them in the international Wages for Housework network. This background is important and cannot be forgotten. At the conference, Group I said very little publicly, and alleged privately that the "accusations" in the paper were false. They played the role of victims, to be identified with by all those who had doubts and disagreements.

The conference was organized precisely in order to have a political discussion to clarify what Wages for Housework means. Group I refused to engage in that process of clarification. They did not prepare a statement outlining their agreement or disagreement, and they consistently tried to avoid stating any positions and arguing them through to see if substantial disagreement existed or not.

We cannot equate their expulsion with a turn to authoritarian Leninist politics. It was the first, and with hope, the only such move, and should be viewed as a painful step taken by a new organization rather than as a precedent set by a new feminist "vanguard". People did not come to Montreal to make a split, but they came prepared to make one. We did not say no political difference would be tolerated, we said that political difference, as it emerged, could not be tolerated. There is no need to confuse differences which arise within an established political framework and which are worked out in the ongoing development of a perspective (i.e. the cash or non-cash aspects of the wage once the wage is clearly accepted as the political battleground between the working class and the State), and differences which are outside the political framework we are trying to build (i.e. the libertarian juxtaposition of local and international).

The other Montreal statement claims not to be a plea for "absolute tolerance", yet it makes no concrete proposal for dealing with situations in which a group clearly spells out differences they consider "intolerable", presents them for political discussion at a conference and meets only a series of evasions in response. It must be our continuing work to clarify our perspective from which will flow our strategy and our organization.

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Montreal Power of Women Collective.

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To: All Wages for Housework groups present at the February conference in Montreal, 1975.

We would like to emphasize that this paper is only the beginning of the kind of discussion we think we need to have. It represents an attempt to set out the basic parameters by clarifying what we consider to be the underlying political principles:

- 1) Politically: How to broaden and develop our perspective by including all the dimensions of human liberation; how to articulate these values coherently, in a way that speaks to the needs of women without becoming obscure.
- 2) Organizationally: How to structure our network and our local groups in such a way that we can co-ordinate our international struggle effectively without stifling discussion and political initiative at the base (or, how to reconcile base autonomy with the necessity of building a strong, coherent international struggle).

When we first read and heard about the Wages for Housework perspective in Montreal, all of us experienced a "click"; for, we recognized in this perspective the solution to our malaise with the feminist movement of the '60's and saw in the perspective an analysis which at last linked the liberation of women from their "feminine role" and so-called "biological destiny" to their crucial role in the overthrow of capitalism. All of us saw the Montreal conference as an important moment in the development of our struggle - the opportunity to come together to work out an international strategy, to define immediate goals and to consider local struggles within an international perspective.

Since the conference we have all spent a considerable amount of time in discussion. We believe that the conference has set important precedents which we must carefully evaluate and has raised political questions which are fundamentally related to the content of the perspective itself and which we cannot ignore.

However, before we can have any discussion about the events of the conference, or understand its political direction, we must realize our own place in history. Industrial capitalism has (almost) succeeded in making most people feel outside the historical process. The reality of having little or no control over our everyday lives has been quite effective in making us experience that lack of control; powerlessness and ahistoricity become part of our self-perception. The fact that we have come together to change the world has changed our relationship to the world, its history and its future. Our conscious relation to the historical process, however, may lag behind the actual change in that relationship. To prod it along a bit, let us indulge in a little sensitization to our own significance.

Our place in any history of the women's movement, or of anti-capitalist struggles in general, is already assured. Any article written in the past couple of years about the women's movement has had to deal with Wages for Housework, even where that treatment has been critical. The mass organized women's movement has been inactive for a few years now; we represent an attempt to build a new women's movement, organized internationally, around a perspective that has revolutionary implications for the entire anti-capitalist struggle. What we do with this perspective - how we develop it and how we organize around it - should now be our principle concern.

The reason we bring this up is that we feel it is important to stress the historical significance of our perspective, our group, and of the recent conference; to stress that we must think of ourselves and our perspective as a real political force. When we think of Lenin, he appears on a stage; when we think of our own meetings, we see ourselves in the basement of a YWCA, or in a small room of the McGill Student Union, arranging cold cuts for lunch or discussing

the price of pamphlets. It's time for us to realize that we are "on stage" as much as Lenin and the Bolshevik Party and that every one of our decisions is of great historical significance.

It is within this context, that we have undertaken to write this paper. It now seems clear to us that all the problems raised by the Montreal Wages for Housework conference - those we discussed formally in our meetings, those we heard about privately, and those that were never mentioned at all - form a single, coherent issue with implications both structural (organizational) and political. The structure of the organization we build expresses the politics of those who build it. Articulating that content, and linking it to the structural form it assumes, would be a most valuable contribution to the development of our perspective - and indeed, our political future depends upon it.

How Political Content is Expressed Organizationally

The way we organize our struggle reveals important elements of the world we want to build. Saying "we don't want to provide blueprints of the future society" forestalls any discussion of the basic values embodied in our perspective. Though evasion makes a critique of the values embodied in the perspective more difficult, it certainly does not render it impossible. These values become visible when we closely examine the organizational forms and political content put forward in any articulation of the perspective.

Unfortunately, the recent conference very rarely got beyond organizational forms and into political content. All the partisanship was played out on the level of these organizational forms. However, the choice of one type of structure over another is itself a value choice - i.e. it is not coincidental or arbitrary, but a choice between alternatives governed by the values held by those who do the choosing. A brief review of the events of the conference reveals this relationship between content and form.

The Public Meeting

The Friday night public meeting should not be considered as something apart from the conference since it raised all the political and organizational questions which plagued the conference itself. There are obviously many questions which we must discuss for our future work in Montreal - the presence of men at meetings, the kind of publicity, and how to run the meeting itself. But we must keep in mind the central principle at stake here: the extent to which local groups are responsible for making decisions about their local meetings.

Considering the fact that the international network has never set out any "rules" for public meetings (and we would question the idea in principle if such rules were suggested, although we might agree with specific rules), the Montreal group was subjected to a considerable amount of pressure and criticism from a small group of women within the network. Yes, we do believe that there is such a thing as constructive criticism; but let's not confuse that with concerted attempts, made publicly, to wrest control from our hands.

Even though we made it clear in our letters that we certainly hoped that other women from the network would be able to come to that meeting, we also made it clear that this meeting was part of our own local work. Even before the meeting started, there were attempts made to exercise control over the running of the meeting.

The first instance of this was over the presence of men. Judy and Silvia went to Susan and told her that the Lesbian women from Toronto did not want to attend a meeting with men present. This is certainly something to keep in mind for future meetings involving these women, but Susan expressed the feelings of our group in maintaining that since our publicity had never specified that only women were invited, it would be a bad move to ask the men present to leave 15 minutes after the meeting was scheduled to start. At that point, it was decided (by Judy, Silvia, Clare, and Susan) to continue as

planned, with the men present. Then Frances proposed that only women be allowed to ask questions. This was not only inexcusable interference on her part, but a bad move because it divided the women present over the question of men - not a good beginning to a feminist discussion.

It then became clear that certain people in the audience as well as on the panel wanted to cut short any questions or comments that sounded even vaguely critical. We thought that this attitude at a public meeting, advertised in the mass media as it was, was extremely unrealistic at best, and authoritarian at worst. We feel that the attempt to cut short critical questions at a public meeting parallels developments at our own "internal" conference.

The Conference and Political Differences

Throughout the conference there were a series of complaints which echoed informally through the conference, were embodied in the paper presented by the Philadelphia group entitled "Statement of the Problem" and occasionally, and in various forms, made their way into group discussion. The complaints seemed to focus largely around dissatisfaction with "the process", with the absence of "respect" shown to speakers, and with an "atmosphere" of intimidation.

So far, those who have spoken to the issues of intimidation etc. have seen the problem largely in terms of attitudes. We should all be gentler with each other, more respectful; those who provide the movement with leadership should respond to questions with greater patience and should expend greater efforts at formulating clear and unemotional explanations. We even have a detailed outline of procedures at meetings to further these ends (see the Philadelphia group's "Statement of the Problem"). It seems to us that there is a growing sense of "problem" but that so far no one has attempted to analyse the source of the attitudes which have been causing so much discomfort.

What we would like to suggest is that intimidation is a political stance; it is not a personal characteristic which Dale Carnegie can eradicate. It is part of an organizational strategy which sees political differences within a movement as a danger to that movement. Intimidation within the International operates to drive differences out of the International. Debate, if it is carried on at all, is then conducted across clearly defined barriers and is defined as a conflict between "them" and "us".

Such an organizational vision was manifested at the Montreal conference in the way political differences were posed. As we think back over the conference, we realize that there was a consistent tendency to polarize discussion by formulating issues in terms of simplistic dichotomies. Debate was stymied by focusing discussions on a false set of alternatives - a set of alternatives which did, however, ultimately serve to allow questions to be interpreted as opposition and differences of emphasis within the perspective to be interpreted as criticism of the perspective as a whole.

Even a brief review of some of our discussions reveals the way in which false polarities were used to "flush out the dissidents" as over and over again real choices and real discussion gave way to "are you for us or against us" votes. Such votes are tests of loyalty and they are manipulative. Divergent tendencies are either totally obscured or they are forced to express themselves as irreconcilable opposition, in which case they are dealt with as such and need not threaten the appearance of internal unity. Such tactics are part of an organizational strategy which sees no room for divergent tendencies within a single perspective.

Our discussion of the wage is a case in point. The vote which ended the discussion was taken on a motion which obscured all the tendencies which had appeared during the course of discussion. Instead of dealing openly with the different emphases which were appearing, the issue was posed in a simplistic polarity: Are you for or against the demand for a wage? Implicit in which is the question: Are

you with the International or do you take a stand against it and therefore outside of it? The divergent tendencies which were buried at the conference represent differences in emphases - for example, differences in the extent to which one emphasizes the non-cash aspects of the struggle in propagandizing, as well as differences in the extent to which one sees the revolutionary impact of the perspective as flowing automatically from the cash demand. These are the different tendencies which should be discussed at an international conference. They are tendencies which are inherent in the perspective itself as it has been developed out of our experiences as women and as members of the working class, and we must organize to deal with them within the International so that the perspective can be broadened and deepened to include all the dimensions of human liberation.

Far from setting the stage for such debate, the way in which questions were posed reflected a disturbing lack of political trust within the International. The underlying distrust intimidated and isolated new members, as well as many not so new members, and locked groups into badly defined positions. The result was that people chose to remain silent rather than to risk appearing suspect and, regardless of conscious intention, such situations are highly manipulative.

The question of leadership is intrinsically related to the different tendencies which we have described in our consideration of the discussion of the wage at the conference. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the emphases and tendencies within the perspective are embodied in people and political ideas do not have an existence independent of those individuals who hold them. Leadership emerges in the process of the development and clear articulation of a political position and this process was completely obscured by the way in which the leadership issue was raised in our discussion of organization. Once again, instead of dealing with the complexities of the issue, we dealt with a set of false alternatives: Leadership versus libertarianism or do you accept or reject leadership? Within these broad categories, the discussion of leadership could only be grossly simplistic and it was. Leaders were somehow equated with experience, knowledge, and "political clarity", endowed with "the responsibility of taking the initiative ..." (p. 5, Toronto statement on organization) and "helping" those who don't yet understand.

Within this context, questions become statements of ignorance and the refusal to respond to questions becomes poor educational method. Clearly, leadership has a responsibility to clarify; but it is also clear to us that the refusal to deal with points that were raised and the tendency to push these positions into an anti-international camp are reflective of neither personal style nor teaching methods. They are statements of a political position and part of a strategy to suppress differences within the International by building an organizational structure which must deal with divergence as irreconcilable opposition.

The debate which surrounded the expulsion of the Toronto group is most instructive in this respect. It has now become clear to us that it, too, was used as a test of loyalty thus completely obscuring the fact that we had never discussed an organizational strategy to deal with political differences. The fact that as an International we have never decided the use of expulsion as a political weapon was obscured by the way in which the entire issue was raised. The vote to expel was put as a test of faith; to vote for expulsion was to vote for the International. Opposition to expulsion became opposition to the International and it is significant that the vote was split, not between pros and cons, but between pros and abstentions.

We began this paper with our sense of the historical significance of what we are doing. The expulsion of the Toronto group must be seen within this historical perspective; for it is an important political precedent and sets the tone for future debate within the International.

While our own group never had any difficulty agreeing with the positions on class, leadership, and the International as stated in

the Toronto paper on organization, we did feel that the broad dichotomies which were posed somewhat oversimplified the problems of organization. It became clearer as the conference proceeded, however, that the real reason for basing the discussion of organization on that paper was, in fact, to finally settle the split which had arisen at the New York conference between the Wages for Housework group from Toronto and the group which was finally expelled. Presumably the Wages for Housework Group II hoped to force the other group into a clear admission of their political differences so that there would be a clear case for that group leaving the conference. The group was expelled, which suggests that their political differences from the perspective were quite clear and that those differences could not be contained within our movement.

The facts of the matter are, however, that no such clarity was established. The group which was expelled consistently claimed that the statement was false and, in the absence of any clearly defined position, after six frustrating hours, the group was expelled on the basis of "embryonic differences". We assumed that these differences were those which had already divided the movement elsewhere (eg. Italy) rather than exploring the concrete differences which so obviously existed within groups and between one group and another.

In the absence of clear political positions, we are left with a situation in which rumours are rife. There has been talk of a split within the New York group and we also know that there was talk of expelling another group on the grounds that if they did not seem too happy with the expulsion of the Toronto group, they must have held at least some of their views and therefore were a potential threat to the organization.

There are some basic contradictions within a movement which condemns Leninism and vanguardism and then expels factions whose political differences are at best undeveloped. These contradictions have returned to haunt us. Since all women are workers, we all have the duty to clarify our political differences. We have come to believe that expulsion on the basis of political differences without a clearly defined policy concerning the handling of political differences within the movement is the organizational expression of a political position - a position which is not in keeping with the content of our perspective and the objectives of our struggle. One cannot separate theory from practice; the content of a struggle from the organizational structure which mounts that struggle. But the relationship between the two is not automatic. We must set up safeguards against an organization which embodies political principles which are alien to our objectives and which reflects the capitalistic double-standard of saying one thing and, in fact, doing quite another.

This is not a plea for absolute tolerance. Clearly, there are some views which are incompatible with our perspective. However, it is also clear to us that there are some differences which are inherent to the perspective and which must be allowed to exist so that they can be dealt with within the perspective. The fundamental political question is: Are we going to build an organization which tolerates and contains such debate or are we laying the groundwork for an organization which must constantly act to remove such debate from within its framework.

Edie Farkas
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2
May 1, 1975

Dear Sisters:

This statement is in reply to and in support of the statement by the six women in the Montreal group. With the exception of the few points mentioned below, we agree with what they have said and appreciate the time and careful thought they have given to the issues involved.

We do feel that it is a misinterpretation of our group's paper to suggest that we viewed "the problem" as one of personality or psychology. We have always maintained that these dynamics represented political choices. We agree with Montreal that the procedures followed at our meetings were the expression of "a position which is not in keeping with the content of our perspective and the objectives of our struggle."

We do not deny that there were political differences which emerged between the expelled Toronto group and the majority at the Montreal conference. However, we feel that the way in which the discussion proceeded had the effect of obscuring and confusing those differences.

On the issue of the public meeting, we do not agree that the central principle at stake is "the extent to which local groups are responsible for making decisions about local meetings." The problem is not international incursions on local autonomy; the problem is that we have no agreed-upon procedures for meetings, for how they are to be publicized, whether or not men are to be invited and if so whether they are to ask questions, etc, for who is to make such decisions and at what point they are considered to be irrevocable.

Although we certainly feel that mistakes were made in the planning and publicity, we agree with Montreal's criticisms of the tone of the meeting. This, again, is not a question of psychology nor of manners, but of political effectiveness. However much the members of sectarian left groups may deserve our scorn, expressing that scorn in a public meeting is likely to convey to uncommitted members of the audience--those most likely to respond to our perspective--that we're just another sect in the sectarian debate, and have nothing to do with their struggle as members of the working class.

The public meeting, however, is merely an example of a general problem: the lack of explicit policy. If we are committed to an international perspective and wish to work as an international organization, we must establish explicit guidelines in place of implicit understandings--or misunderstandings. This should include some specification of what kinds of political differences will be considered intolerable, and what kinds will be viewed as necessary and helpful to the development of the perspective. Clear policies must be decided upon and put in writing so that everyone has a full understanding of procedures and expectations. Now is the time to lay the groundwork on which to build international strategy and also to build the trust and unity that is essential for further work.

Our group has been discussing organizational questions for some weeks now, and will continue to do so. We urge other groups to do the same and to formulate and distribute organizational proposals before September so that we can discuss them at the next International conference.

Philadelphia Wages for Housework Action Group