

WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK AND THE CRISIS

The main questions we have to raise in analysing the present capitalist crisis are essentially three: 1)What are the power relations between capital and the working class today internationally?(What power relations are revealed by the intensity of the capitalist crisis?) 2)What is capital planning? That is, what is capital planning through the crisis and for after the crisis? 3)What new possibilities and dimensions of struggle are opened up by the crisis?

We have to look at the crisis not as it hits us either in Canada or the U.S.A., but as it affects the working class all over the world. We have to see the crisis not as a local, domestic phenomenon, but as an international process. This is crucial first of all because capital plans internationally. This means that when they are planning... their strategy for Spain or Italy they do so with Detroit or Japan in mind. Thus, we have to have an international perspective because only from an international perspective can we see what role we are supposed to play in their schemes at any particular point; and can we see how we can attack them more effectively, ^{and} avoid tactics or objectives that would play right into their hands. The other point is that whenever we consider only our local situation, our local strength, capital seems all powerful. But if we have an international perspective we see that the power relations are in our favour; we realise that most of the world population today is uniting against capital. And we also know that our particular situation is not an accident but is the rule. As Malcolm X said so often, "you cannot confine your struggle to one little neighbourhood, or one little community, or one little country" for "what happens to one of us today happens to all of us". Thus, paraphrasing Malcolm X, we cannot afford to be limited to domestic thinking, because capitalism is not only a domestic issue, and there is no kind of action today in any country that is going to bear any fruit unless that action is tied to the overall international struggle. This is why I want to speak of the crisis not as it affects us in Brooklyn, in Quebec or in London, but as it affects us--the working class women and men--all over the world.

When we speak of the crisis we should first be careful not to confuse those aspects of the crisis which stem from the fact that capital is in crisis (e.g. the collapse in productivity which has been a constant tendency throughout the sixties and seventies on an international scale, the incapacity of capital to maintain adequate levels of profit and those aspects which are artificially created by capital in order to restore discipline and its political control over the working class (e.g. lay-offs, inflation, food shortages, etc).

We must also be careful not to accept the mystified way in which the left has analysed this crisis. If you listen to the left, in almost every case, you have the impression that the crisis is some sort of organic disease which attacks capital periodically, mostly because capitalism is irrational, anarchic and does not know how to manage itself (from the viewpoint of the left, not only the working class, but capital too has no "class consciousness"). In the United States, the left says that capital is in crisis because of the Vietnam War; that in the war capital wasted alot of resources, and now they are paying the price for this. Or they find other justifications--they say that the Arab countries are getting together, the U.S. is losing its hegemony and that's why we have a crisis. But whatever their explanation, they never connect the crisis to the struggle of the working class. This is because the left always analyses capital per se, independently of the working class, as something which is totally self-creating, self-developing, and at times self-destroying. They cannot conceive that the working class has anything to do with the way capital develops and the choices it makes. The working class is only a victim of capital, an appendage to capital, a cost of production, rather than the main force in determining capitalist planning. In fact, the left goes so far as to defend the working class from the accusation of having provoked the crisis. For it would be a shame if the workers had put capital into crisis. So they go out of their way to put the case that it is not our fault.

Capital, on the contrary, is well aware of why and how it is in crisis; that this is an economic and political crisis, a crisis of accumulation, of development, and this means that it is a crisis of the mechanisms of control capital has over the working class.§ In fact we cannot understand this crisis unless we look at the struggles which have taken place on a world scale in the sixties and seventies. What is so peculiar about the sixties and seventies is that capital was attacked simultaneously on two fronts. I am not saying that this was the first time in the history of capital,

§Clearly, there are aspects of the crisis which are only indirectly related to class struggle. For example, the financial collapses due to wrong speculations on the Eurodollar market. Being unable to raise enough capital by "productive" investments, capital had to rely more and more on speculations on the financial market, etc. But even in this case it is because of the fall of productivity in the factories and the community that capital had to rely on financial speculation.

but clearly there was a crisis on two fronts. Capital was attacked both in the factories, by wages workers, and in the community by wageless workers. If we look on an international scale in the sixties and seventies we see an enormous refusal by waged workers (most of all factory workers) of their work. You can see this in terms of the numbers of strikes, and by the fact that internationally as wages kept going up productivity went down. § And this is the capitalist crisis. And whenever these workers did not have the power to wage an open, organised struggle, their refusal took the form of a passive resistance: absenteeism, sabotage, slow-downs, which have escalated throughout the sixties. The story is the same whether you look at Britain, or Canada or the U.S., Italy, France, Argentina, Chile. In fact one characteristic in this period is the homogeneity of the struggles in the factory, both with respect to objectives and to forms of struggle--and this on an international level. Not only workers increasingly refused to work, they also refused the instruments of capitalist discipline in the factory; the trade unions. Two themes have been reoccurring in the capitalist press over the last few years: the "blue-collar blues" and "union disaffection". That is, workers are as much "alienated" from the unions as they are from work, because they realise that the only function of the unions in the factories is to guarantee the price of their labour power so that capital can plan ahead, to bargain the price of work and make sure capital does not lose in the bargain. Recently, during the strike of workers at the Daily News in New York, the head of the union was called to court and told by the judge to get the men back to work. "Don't you think I have tried?" --said the unionist-- that's what I've been telling them for the last few days, but I can't call them back to work because I did not have anything to do with the strike to begin with." "What kind of unionist are you?" the judge said--"if you cannot control your men you should resign". That judge was shortsighted, for the refusal of unions is so widespread, that "changing the guard" won't do it. That's a very severe crisis, because when workers refuse capitalist discipline the entire social-political economic system is in danger. It is no accident that workers struggles have been able to make governments fall--as in Britain with the miners--and cause in titutitional crises, because the entire social apparatus is based on and functions for the accumulation of capital. This is why the crisis is both economic and political. The refusal of capitalist production and capitalist rule has gone so far that, as the director for the British International Affairs said recently in relation to England "What we have today is "a negative dictatorship of the proletariat""(NY Times, April 9, 1975).

At the same time, throughout the sixties and seventies there has been a severe crisis of discipline outside of the factory. I mentioned last night the struggle of Black people in the United States which found its power base in the community. We have the struggles of students in most countries of the world, prisoners, women's struggles, and the struggles of the 'peasants', or more accurately, agricultural workers. (e.g. in Vietnam, Chile, East Bengali, where after the implementation of the Green Revolution, when lots of small farmers were forced to sell their land, there were massive appropriations of land). Among women, there were struggles around welfare, rent strikes, squatting, struggles against prices, etc. This last has been as massive in the third world as in the metropolis. But there is also an underground type of struggle that we have to rediscover and reinterpret. These are struggles which are invisible, because they have not taken an organisational form, and yet, give us a measure of the rebellion of women which is taking place throughout the world. The left never sees it, and maybe we also do not see it as clearly as we should, but capital knows it. In the U.S. and in Britain for the last few months they have been talking about the crisis of the family and family policies are top priority in their planning because the family is the crucial institution in the formation of labour power. What they mean by the "crisis of the family" is that women are refusing housework: they are refusing certain rhythms of work, refusing the work of enforcing a certain discipline on their children, and, in general, refusing the conditions of the marriage contract. One of the things that strangely enough (after so much talk about "overpopulation") has been bothering capitalist planners is that in certain areas the birth rate is collapsing. In some countries they are happy when the birth rate goes down, though they want it to go down only for certain people (people on welfare, etc)--as they say, it is "quality control". But the birth rate has gone down in every country and at a rate that has gone beyond their planning. So now, article after article has come out saying that if we go on this way we will soon be at the replacement level, and this is dangerous, not because they need more workers, at least in the US, but because the birth rate is going down "for reasons of its own", independently of their planning.

§ Even in China there has been alot of struggles. The Cultural Revolution in the sixties was a massive working class struggle which is still going on--to the point that last Spring the industrial district of Wuhan was in turmoil and in February 1975 the dockers in Shanghai were demonstrating and carrying posters saying "Be the bosses of the docks and not the slaves of tonnage" (Which is why, in an unprecedented move in a socialist country, the new Chinese Constitution has recognised the 'right to strike'.)

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This means that women are refusing to sacrifice their lives to have three children, or even two. Many women do not even want to have one, because they realise the price they have to pay for it, because every child is more work for us. In other words, the collapse of the birth rate is a sign of women's refusal of housework and capital is afraid of it. Another thing they worry about is that women haven't been performing properly their functions as mothers and wives. Whenever they talk about rebellious children (school dropouts, juvenile crime, teenage alcoholism, runaways, etc), they know that the root of the problem is that mothers are not exerting the expected discipline. And the State is coming into the community more and more, to take over and socialise some of the functions that women are refusing to perform (e.g. drugging "hyperactive" children etc.) Divorces, "illegitimacy", female-headed families, have been increasing in an unprecedented way and all these are expressions of women's refusal of housework. Also there has been an increase in infanticide and child abuse; the rate of infanticide has doubled every ten years. These, obviously, are not struggles, but they are a direct expression of our anger and its explosive potential. Another threat to the stability of the family is the development of the Lesbian Movement. Now, capital is not by its nature necessarily against homosexuality. For example, in the history of capitalism, male homosexuality has been tolerated and at times even encouraged. (In Nazi Germany which was all based on the cult of motherhood, that is, on the most brutal oppression of women (who were expected to produce children for the factories and the armies) there was a strong homosexual male culture. But the question is different when it is female homosexuality, because in our case homosexuality attacks a very specific condition of our production.

The struggles of the wageless in the community and the Third World have seriously limited capital's mobility. This is why it is so difficult for them to regain control, and this is why they sound so gloomy and vague as to the extension and depth of the crisis. It is increasingly difficult for capital to regain control over the working class either by running to Third World countries, or by bringing immigrants to the metropolis, or by changing the composition of the working class in the factories (bringing in women, youth, blacks, immigrants) or by simply laying off people. For example, unemployment--or as they call it the "old time religion"--does not function any longer as it used to. Today when they throw people out of waged work they go on welfare, or they have unemployment insurance, or they start occupying houses, cutting rents, shoplifting, etc. It is no accident that in some countries (U.S., France, etc), unemployment insurance has been extended to a year or more, and in the U.S. the Federal Government has stepped in every time the "company funds" were "exhausted". They know that the alternative is riots. In fact, the debate which is taking place today within capital on whether to fight first inflation or recession is actually a debate on how far they can go before people take arms. In the meantime, just to be safe, the mayor of Los Angeles has announced that they are training "crowd-control" squads, "to be used in the event of civil disruption" (food riots, labour struggles, etc.) (Newsweek, Feb. 5, 1975) and all over the world over the last few years armies have been restructured to cope with the "internal army". Cefis (the head of Montedison in Italy) speech to the Army on the international character of capital, and the consequent need to overcome the prejudice of the "enemy at the border" is a masterpiece in this sense.

Another example, of the power of the wageless in limiting capital's mobility, is the way in which the struggles in the community have affected capital's plans in the factories. In this case England and the U.S. are the best examples. In the U.S., through the Kennedy era, there was a lot of talk about the wonders of automation. Technology was to be the solution to all problems, and particularly to the problem of increasing wage scales. Capital has always used technology to phase out workers who had become too expensive. But by the end of the sixties there were no more words about technology. On the contrary, you had an ecological movement which was raising all kind of misgivings about technology, pollution, etc., and it culminated with the energy crisis which (as Sandy Rose wrote in Fortune) posed the necessity of using more "human energy" i.e. more labour power. Despite all the ideology the fact remains that both in England and the U.S. Capital has not substantially invested in new technology for a long time. Why is it so? Clearly, they could not afford a further process of automation in a situation where throwing people out of the factories no longer meant that they would starve and beg for jobs, but that they would become a "social cost". When the wageless become a massive social cost, when they go on welfare instead of lining up at the factory gates, clearly capital thinks twice before throwing people out of waged work.

Now I would like to talk about what capital is planning. And then about the possibilities of struggle we have. Certainly capital has plans, but the first thing they have to achieve before they implement their plans, is to regain political control, there is no way they can reconvert the economy on an international or national scale, unless they regain control. Unless they are sure that workers, waged and unwaged, are going to work, that the families will provide a certain stability, they are not going to have more investments. For the credit freeze is nothing but a capitalist strike: capital is going on strike. They are willing to attack their own profits temporarily to control the working class. They are willing to shut off the factories, to stop investing, to halt the process of accumulation for a certain period in order to break the back of the workers and make us accept a certain work discipline, and of course, less money (this is what zero growth ideology is all about.) This is their top priority and this is also what makes it so difficult to make predictions. Because what they will plan, and how far they will be able to carry it through, depends on our response, depends on the level of power the working class is capable of organising to resist their plans. So, we cannot predict exactly, because among other things this would mean to fixate our facts, to see their plans independent of our struggles to resist them. But we can see the main tendencies.

Now, clearly there are two policies, one for the factory and one for the community, though they are not unrelated. In the factories, one of the trends which is gaining increasing momentum is the reconversion of the assembly line, or as they call it, the "humanisation of work". Capital, in fact, has discovered that the assembly line is "alienating" and, Sweden taking the lead, all over the world they are experimenting with alternative "lines": mini-line, team-group, etc. The purpose is to create smaller units of production, where the workers work more "in cooperation" (for example, supervising each other and substituting each other when one in the team is absent), where instead of "just turning the screw" they put together e.g. an entire car, and beside that, they organise "design" their work, so that they feel more "creative". It is called "job enrichment", and where productivity is not calculated on the individual worker but on the team (if one worker slows down she is affecting the entire team productivity). It is no accident that this is presented as the way to the future, and that wherever it has been implemented costs of production have been going down, and it has soon become clear that less workers were needed (see on this "plant is experimenting with changing work line" in N.Y. Times, April 9, 1975). And it is no accident that in both the U.S. and Sweden wherever team-group production has been introduced they have chosen women to work on it. In fact, the team-group production, with its notion of "participation", self-supervision, "responsibility" etc, is an attempt to introduce into the factory the conditions which have always been characteristic of work in the home. It is an attempt to make the factory production more "family like". The second aspect of the work-place they have to rejuvenate is the unions because they know that as they are, everybody hates them. Thus, in every country there has been a powerful trend to give the unions a "new militancy". In England, in the U.S.A., In Canada, there has been a movement for "union democracy", in which the left has been heavily and willingly used. (the most typical case in which the appeal to "union democracy" was used was the reorganisation of the U.M.W. in the U.S.A., which led to Miller's election, the same Miller who a few months ago had done his best to "democratically" screw the workers during the miners' strike).

As far as the community is concerned--and here we have to talk primarily about women--capital is in a bind, because on one side they are forcing, through inflation, more and more women to take a second job (In Europe, some countries are proposing to substitute female for immigrant labour which is becoming too expensive). On the other hand, they need to "stabilise" the family. Also in relation to housework--to the level of its productivity--there is not a unified capitalist policy. This summer there was a conference in Bucharest on "demographic policies" attended

by representatives of States from all over the world. (This already says who internationally is controlling our work). It was a productivity conference, to decide how many workers should be produced and under what conditions. At this conference there was a division in the capitalist camp. On one side there were the "industrialised" countries who are increasingly worried about the explosion of the community in the metropolis and the explosion of the Third World (i.e. they are concerned with the spreading refusal of wagelessness both in the metropolis and in the third world) and, therefore, pushed for "population control". On the other, there were the socialist countries and some Third World countries (like Brazil and Argentina) who are planning their development on the basis of the availability and cheap price of labour power. There are other aspects of housework, however, on which everybody agrees. For example, the question of "family stability" is crucial in every country, and even more so in the situation created by this crisis. The press continually emphasises--and this in many countries--that in hard times we need more solid family ties, it is part of the new "spiritualism" that capital always appeals

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to demand and... But however the ideology, the fact remains that the family, that his women, his supposed to function as the shock absorber for the crisis--we are expected to work more to compensate the fact that we have less money, and to provide emotional support for our unemployed husbands, etc. Another reason why family stability is top priority is that there is an increasing rebellion among young people which has to be checked. In this respect we can already see what are capital's plans. In some cases these plans are already in the experimental stage. First of all they are setting up community agencies, i.e. agencies financed by the government for community control. This can range from providing "family therapy", drugs for "hyperactive" children (according to Business Week--in the States, five million children daily take a variety of drugs provided through schools or community centres to "calm them down" Chemotherapy is where all the money is going nowadays, even the unions distribute methadone in the plants to the workers). They are also talking of setting up schools for women i.e. classes to teach women how to be "good mothers" (they will have many varieties of classes; some just for the women, others for the woman and the husband, etc). It is interesting to see that as soon as women rebel against their work it becomes immediately clear who is the supervisor and beneficiary of our work, for immediately the State comes in to take over directly the functions women are refusing to perform. And, in fact, the struggle of women against housework is becoming more and more directly a struggle against the State. We have seen this already with the struggle of welfare mothers in the sixties, and we see it today in the ongoing struggle of women to resist the intensification of their work which the State is trying to impose on us. A clear example is the struggle against the "de-institutionalisation" process, that is the process whereby the State, in the U.S. and other countries, is trying to dismantle certain institutions (hospital, mental institutions, children's institutions, etc) apparently for "humanistic purposes", in reality, because they want to reduce the cost of these institutions and shift the "care" for the institutionalised onto our shoulders. The problem they face however, is that they are well aware that women are rebelling more and more against housework and against its wageless condition. I want to read a passage from a study on the work in the U.S. commissioned by H.F.W. in 1973: "In almost all Federal programs, work is equated with paid employment. Using housework as an example, we can see the harmful psychological and social consequences of the common definition. A housewife by this definition does not work. But ironically if her services are replaced by a housekeeper, a cook or babysitter, these replacements are defined as workers because their salaries contribute to the GNP. It is clearly an inconsistency to say that a woman who cares for her own children is not working, but if she takes a job looking after the children of another woman, she is working. In social, economic and psychological terms this equation of work and money has produced a synonymy of work and pay. Accordingly, work that is not paid is not considered as valuable as paid work... One wonders the effect of this denigration of unpaid work on the current apparent unwillingness of some mothers and fathers to devote time to the proper care of and upbringing of their children. This society may have dangerously downgraded the most important work a human being can perform. For the sake of our children and the future of our society, an alternative definition of work might therefore serve as a better guide."

They talk about alternative definitions of work and they also suggest--just to make it more acceptable--social security, and maybe a family allowance. They are far from proposing wages for housework; yet some women worry that because they talk in these terms our strategy must be wrong and easily coopted. It seems to me it proves exactly the opposite, that is, that we are attacking the problem where it hurts, except that they offer us a finger, we want the arm.

I want to discuss now what possibilities for action the present crisis is opening up for us. First of all, what is happening today speaks directly to our strategy, because today we can see very clearly how capital is using wagelessness on a mass scale as a work discipline. They have used it in the past with half of the world population; now they are extending it also to the other half. They are making everyone wageless--permanently or temporarily--to drive wages down, and in fact many unions are already--at least in the U.S.--accepting pay cuts and rebargaining their contracts in order to "save jobs". Also the fact that capital is using wagelessness politically, makes it very clear that our struggle against wagelessness is a political struggle, i.e. a struggle that is waged immediately against the state. And it makes it clear that the struggle for wages for housework--(the struggle to have capital pay for the entire cost of our reproduction) is not only a feminist struggle, but the struggle for the entire working class. In the present situation, in fact, to struggle for jobs is suicidal for every worker. First, because we do not want more work, but more money and less work, which is why demonstrations to "save jobs" draw so little enthusiasm among workers. As a french worker put it "until the 90 per cent (unemployment insurance) was announced, my wife called me a loafer" ("Many Jobless in French City but Few Worry") (N.Y. Times, Feb. 17, 1975). Second, because when we ask for jobs, inevitably we are fighting against each other, we are allowing capital to reduce us to competit-

ers in the labor market. And in fact, capital is counting on that, they want workers to blame the crisis on other workers. What is happening in the U.S. around Seniority is very indicative: minorities and women are made to fight against white male workers for the jobs that are more and more scarce. Also capital is using the threat of joblessness to persecute and discipline alien immigrants, who in every country are becoming more and more militant and therefore more expensive. (In the U.S., while they are making everybody wageless they are passing state laws that allow children, from five to fourteen to be employed in the fields as pickers, for they are not covered by the minimum wage.) Finally, when capital goes on strike and shuts down the factories, for many workers the struggle in the community is the only possible alternative, short of asking capital to open the doors of the factories. In fact, in many countries, workers who have been laid off, are reorganising in the community, because the community is where the wealth, in the form of consumption, is present. Houses, transport, supermarkets, hospitals, welfare offices, etc: all these are areas where we can organise our power, all these are moments of struggle to reappropriate what belongs to us. And all these are wages for housework struggles.

Clearly women are the first protagonists of these struggles because we live and work primarily in the community and that's where we can best organise our power. It is also because we are expected to pay the highest price in the crisis. We are supposed to absorb all the conflicts the crisis is causing. By no accident the press keeps telling us how to cook "cheap" and how to save money. All this means we are expected to work more. It means we have to spend more time shopping, because we have to walk to places that offer cheaper bargains, because we have to count the pennies and spend hours at the counters watching for the prices that keep going up. It means that we have to wash things by hand instead of using the laundremats; and it means we have to provide more psychological support to our men who are being laid off. Now we can use all these areas where capital is trying to use us and turn them against them.

Silvia Federici
Feb. 1975