

LESBIANISM AND POWER

This speech was first given at the international conference of the International Wages for Housework Campaign, held in London, England, 18-20th July, 1975. It was preceded by three lesbian women speaking about their experiences and struggles as a mother, a black woman, and an office worker in London and in the still more repressive conditions of Belfast. It was followed by a presentation and discussion on the meaning of organisational autonomy for lesbians in the wages for housework network. This speech has been slightly revised since that date.

We're putting forward at this conference some conclusions that we've come to as lesbians fighting for wages for housework about how that fight must be organised -- what kind of internal structures we need and what kind of questions we have to speak to in spreading the campaign. But before we go on to discuss these organisational conclusions a little later in the day, we wanted to make sure we all understand the basis of these conclusions, that is, what is the position and exploitation of lesbians, the position and exploitation of all women, the power relations between women who call themselves lesbian and women who call themselves straight. and how these power relations function in capitalist production and in the movement.

In other words we want to talk about lesbianism and power, that is, about what lesbianism and particularly organised lesbianism means for the power women have, because that question of power is what will determine what forms of organisation we use in the wages for housework movement.

Before we go into specifics I want to deal with one idea that shouldn't come up in this network, but that is still around (and the fact that it is around is evidence both of the power relations within the movement between straight and lesbian women and of the power relation between all of us and capital - that is, of our weakness). That idea is that lesbianism has nothing to do with power. It takes the form of people feeling that when we say lesbianism is a source of power, or make comments or jokes based on our relatively high degree of autonomy from men, we are putting forward a life style either as a political strategy or as a personal solution. This assumes that if, as we know, it is neither, then it is "just sexual", not a part of our political life. This is fundamentally the same position as that of the liberals outside the network who put it more crudely. They say: "what you do in bed is your own business." Women in this network in general know better than to make this separation between the personal and the political. If we accept that our whole lives are political, that every moment of our lives is determined by our work, our relation to capital, that every moment is a moment where we are forced to struggle with and against that work, then we have to understand lesbianism as a form of struggle and therefore as a challenge to capital's power over us.

What is it a struggle against?

A. It is a struggle against work in the obvious sense that relating to men is very hard work -- sexual, emotional, and laundry.

B. In attacking this work we attack the institution in which it is organised, i.e. the family. The family is the institution of capitalist production where wageless housework and waged

factory work come together in the form of a relation between a woman and a man. The relations in the family are wage relations, and lesbianism attacks those wage relations, which are fundamental to all wage relations. And it does so by attacking the function - the work - of the wageless woman.

In undermining the power men have over us - all men over all women - it both frees us from their control and assaults and strengthens the whole class against capital.

C. It upsets the appearance that the capitalist organisation of our work is natural and inevitable and all for our own human needs. Strikes by other kinds of service workers, eg. nurses, have the same kind of disruptive effect on that appearance*.

D. We are attacking the discipline whereby our whole lives are fragmented and repressed. We are making a fight against the repression of our creativity, the repression of our ability to create physical objects and physical and emotional relations with other people, repression that is essential to capitalist production.

Our sexuality has been separated off from the rest of our creative capacities; our sexual relations are separated off from the rest of our social life. They are separated off as being special. While the rest of our lives are openly disciplined and exploited by capital, sex is supposed to be undisciplined. We look to it often as an area of resistance to the domination of our lives by work. Songs, romance, and the naughtiness or wickedness of sex reinforce our feeling that here at least we must find something to satisfy us.

But even the high hopes we have for our sex lives turn out to repress us still further. Our sexuality is destroyed not only by the physical conditions we labour in, not only by the destruction of all our possibilities for creative expression and relations with each other, not only by being compartmentalised and isolated, but also by the demands we make of it as a result. We use our sexuality to serve as a release for all the tensions built up in the course of the working day. We want it to substitute for all the other channels of self-expression, communication, intimacy and sensuality that are blocked to us.

It can't. It is productive labour that produces, as far as we are concerned, "only the needy individual". The frustration that builds up as a result, that appears as sexual frustration, serves both to channel our energy into compulsive labour and to undermine our energies for the revolution. The division of labour that makes our sexuality work keeps us out of touch with our own potential, our bodies, our possibilities for letting loose, for ecstasy, for feeling the strength we have together. It's a discipline both for work and against the revolution.

One of the mechanisms by which our lives are divided and our capacities are disciplined and repressed is that our production at home and in factories is organised on homosexual lines - women work with other women, or at least do the same work as other women - while our "leisure" and sexual activity is organised on heterosexual lines. In other words our closest relationships and greatest understanding are with women, but we're not supposed to sleep with each other; while the people we are supposed to sleep with are strangers, whose lives have nothing to do with our own, and who have the power of the wage over us. This division of our day into part where our relations

* See "The Home in the Hospital" in the anthology "All Work and No Pay", edited by Suzie Fleming and Wendy Edmond, jointly published by Falling Wall Press and the Power of Women Collective, London, England, 1975. especially p.83.

are supposed to be relations of production and part where we're supposed to build entirely separate relationships "for ourselves" is one of the ways in which our lives are fragmented, and each part of our day becomes work, and we become at each moment detail labourers. In other words the homosexuality of production and the heterosexuality of sex are integrated parts of the productive cycle.

Lesbianism is a struggle against capital's organisation and fragmentation of our day. It flouts the discipline which tells us who to relate to how, and when we are allowed to attempt to be sensual. Because the repression of our sexuality is so crucial to capital, and so crucial to our own ability to keep "sane" and working, the fear of cracking the discipline is very great. The lesbianism which is always just under the surface when women are together, and sometimes even other female sexuality, is classified as "animal" - i.e. not controlled by capital - and resisted in every way because it threatens an explosion.

Now I want to look at what this means for our power. There is an apparent contradiction. In being lesbian we put ourselves in a relatively powerless position, in fact in a position where straight women have power over us, and yet we bring power to ourselves and to all women. The contradiction is most evident with the individual lesbian woman. Being lesbian, and coming out as a lesbian, especially when you are the only one, or maybe one of only a couple in your area or workplace who is known, gives license to men and to other women to hold and exercise an enormous power over you - you are at their mercy. Yet it is still an act of defiance - defying the mould into which capital wants to force you, and it is still a strength to the women around you. In fact it is precisely because it is a threat that you get all the repression. And this repression functions not only as a discipline on you, but as a discipline on all the women around, including the ones who are administering it. We are refusing work, and the consequences we face are used to enforce the work other women must do, precisely as the consequences of not having a waged job are used to discipline waged workers. Women are told that if they step out of line, if they are not submissive enough to men, or refuse their housework - any part of it from the laundry to the smiles in the street - they will be taken for a lesbian, ostracised as a lesbian, may even, horror of horrors, become a lesbian. It is no accident that the entire women's liberation movement has been given this label in an attempt both to stop it in its tracks and, especially, to separate it from other women and prevent them joining it or looking to it for support.

But the position of a movement is different from that of an individual. While an individual can make a struggle, and attack capital, the terms and consequences of that struggle are always firmly in capital's hands. So I want to look next at the power of lesbianism as a movement.

A lesbian movement is a refusal to accept the conditions of repression that are offered as the alternative to the repression of heterosexuality - and therefore a refusal to be this kind of discipline on heterosexual women, like the refusal of the unemployed to line up begging for jobs. The refusal of work and the attack on the division between lesbian and straight women that enforces this work are one and the same thing.

Much more than the isolated lesbian a movement has the possibility not only of disrupting the discipline that binds

us but of making actual gains. And as we change the conditions of lesbian life (and therefore also the conditions of relating to men), as we begin to fight off some of the forces that have repressed us, our ability to live without men, our ability to express ourselves and our feelings for each other are in turn a source of power, just as money, time, facilities, even laws that we win serve to increase our strength. The power created in this way by the movement of lesbians has particularly nourished the Women's Liberation Movement: the solidarity, the drive, the relentless need to organise as women, our feelings for each other that lesbians can often develop and express more fully than anyone else, have been a major victory of the WLM, not in the sense that we have won, but that the strength and knowledge of our own strength is one of the victories we win along the way and a power to move further.

At the same time there are great limits on this movement - precisely the limitations on all the partial struggles we make. At one point some of us hoped to open the floodgates and sweep away capital in a rush of female creativity and power. We couldn't, precisely because sexuality is not something off on its own but one productive relationship which is part of the capitalist productive cycle. Only the revolution destroying all productive relationships will destroy the hell hole of our sexual relations, lesbian and heterosexual. Our sexual relations are still work. They are work because we don't have time for them, because they are still cut off from the rest of our productive lives, because we are always tired, have no time, no place, no patience, because our personalities and our personal relations with everyone around us are shaped by and for capitalist production. Because we are housewives.

Being lesbian doesn't change our fundamental position as women - we are all housewives, we are all wageless, we are all powerless in relation to capital and to men, and we are all dependent on the strength of all women to destroy this position. We can't do it by simply attacking heterosexuality - one form of one part of our labour. And we can't do it alone. The fight for wages for housework can begin very concretely to change the relations - power relations - that determine our sexual lives, and to win the time, place, energy and understanding that we need for them. It can do this because it is a strategy for organisation which can break through the divisions which have isolated us in our struggles and organise the power of women against capital. The separation of the struggle around sexuality from the struggles we are making around the rest of our work has the opposite effect. Where this separation is put forward as a strategy it is a strategy based on defeat, based on an acceptance of the divisions by which capital rules us; it is capital's strategy. There will be other occasions to examine separatism - how it attacks women with different working conditions, women with men, how it gives new form to the repressive myth that sexuality can be an area of freedom. What we want to do here is to look more closely at the division and power relation which gave rise to it, the division and power relation between straight and lesbian women. We want to look at that division in some detail both because it is important in its own right, in fact crucial, and because it is very revealing about power relations in general.

Recently some women in the network have asked what the power of straight women over lesbian women is. We have to be explicit. They can pretend we don't exist. They can pretend we are animals. They can ostracise us socially. They can expose us. They can get us sacked from our jobs. They can get us thrown out of our homes. They can sabotage our struggle. They can drive us into mental asylums. The power relation is also reflected in the fact that we are even further removed than straight women from access to any part of a male wage.

That power relation exists, and the fact that within our own movement lesbian women are only now beginning to come forward and identify ourselves is an indication of how strong that power is; our particular exploitation consists very largely in being forced to hide ourselves.

The power relation is between those who are living according to the rules, who are accepted and established, against those who are abnormal; in this the straight woman, without even wanting to, acts as an agent of the state in relation to us. It is also the power of the worker who works over the worker who is trying to slack off on the job.

In a factory the class war establishes a certain level of productivity, and there is a certain understanding among the workers that each individual should keep around that level - you are out of line both if you do much more and if you do much less - and the community of workers rests on that. The same is true in relation to sexual work, and housework in general, and in the same way there is a community of the oppressed, which shares a common level of exploitation, a common struggle against it, a common understanding. When you are lesbian you are stepping over the line - you put yourself outside the common experience, you are one of the shirkers, not "one of us". When other women complain about their husbands or boyfriends you are considered to be outside that solidarity. And your own struggle is attacked by other women on that basis. And yet it contributes to theirs, contributes to the sex war in which they are engaged. Although our sexual relations are also work they are less productive work for capital in that they do not reproduce as straight women's do the social relationship that is the power of men over women.

I've gone into that specific instance of the division between heterosexual and lesbian women because I think it demonstrates the way that the power relations within the working class are the instrument by which capital enforces our work. And it shows at the same time how it is the organisation of the most powerless - of those whose very function in the hierarchy which capital is built on is precisely to be powerless and thereby to exert a discipline on everyone else - it is the organisation of these women in powerless positions and on the basis of those powerless positions which brings power to all of us. Because when we organise as lesbians we attack the work all women do, and the divisions which enforce that work in all its different forms and conditions, lesbian and straight; we attack them by strengthening ourselves. That's true of every powerless sector - of lesbian women in relation to straight women, of lesbian mothers in relation to lesbians without children, of black women in relation to white women, of women in relation to men. That's what wages for housework is all about. It's about the power of the powerless, about how each kind of production, wage or no wage, development or underdevelopment, sanity or madness, family or non-family, straight or lesbian, is necessary to the whole cycle of exploitation, and how by attacking the particular work we do in each situation we attack capital.

As fighting men on the basis of our exploitation as women is power to the whole class, so our confrontation with men, with schools, employers, the medical profession, straight women, and the organisations which we build, on the basis of our particular exploitation and powerlessness as wageless lesbian women is a power to all women. The organisation of lesbians, as lesbians for Wages for Housework attacks the divisions between women, and the work which has divided us, and gives all of us the power we need to make our fight. The possibilities open to all of us depend on the degree to which the Wages for Housework movement gives expression to this struggle and to the other struggles in which we are engaged, and breaks down their separation from each other. *****

This speech was the result of discussions with the members of Wages Due London and with members of Wages Due Toronto - lesbian groups within the Power of Women Campaign (Britain) and the Wages for Housework Committee (Toronto). Love and Power, Ruth Hall