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ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF FEMINISM AND SOCIALISM

We are a group of socialist women in the women's liberation movement. This paper is the outgrowth of our intensive struggle both in the women's movement and with mixed groups in the socialist movement. Many of the ideas included in this paper must be discussed and analyzed from practice; this paper is intended to be a struggle paper.

There has appeared in the women's movement a major division in the ranks which has surfaced as a tendency among socialist women to leave the women's movement and refuse to be associated with it. This same division has also resulted in many angry and frequently unjustified attacks on the part of some feminists against all socialist women. What lies at the base of this split has been obscured by personalism and emotionalism, but it clearly arises from a concrete ideological contradiction which has yet to be understood or indeed fully analyzed--the real nature, economic and societal, of the oppression of women. This paper is an attempt to free ourselves from an imposed schizophrenia arising from our dual role as socialists and feminists.

What is the real nature of the oppression of woman? The classical analysis of this problem submits that historically the oppression of women arose simultaneously with class society; that is, with the origin of surplus which was drawn off by some men and used to control all women and other men. This same analysis also states that the position of all women within the family is proletarian in relationship to the bourgeois familial power of the male. Socialist theorists have consistently focused on the nature of the former oppression, the exploitation of class, to the extent that there is virtually no analysis which deals with the profoundly important and complex nature of the latter. Women are indeed oppressed as workers on the line, as domestic workers and as black and Third World Peoples. But they, unlike their class and race brothers, face a special oppression common to all women which cannot be fully explained by economic theory.

The oppression of women which Engels described in the The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State was essentially economic in nature and is still in force over women in the form of capitalism. The subordinate position of women in American society today is a vested interest of big business. We are cheap labor in the work force and free labor in the home. We are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. We are largely unorganized by the bourgeois labor unions and we are frequently strikebreakers and reserve labor in times of war. Capitalist society may throw us crumbs, so-called abortion reform, presidential committees and even an "Equal Rights" amendment, but it can never accommodate the demands of all women for self-determination and freedom just as it cannot accommodate the similar demands of male workers and Third World Peoples. There must be a socialist revolution to bring about the changes that women demand.

This supposition requires that the relationship between women and class be analyzed. For if indeed a socialist revolution is necessary for women's liberation, can we define women's economic position in terms of male class structure? It has already been pointed out that in any patriarchal home the woman is the proletarian and the man the bourgeois. It has been pointed out that domestic labor is proletarian regardless of the "class origin" of the laborer. It should be emphasized that class position is determined primarily by the work that is done and its relationship to the means of production and that although consciousness is a factor, it is a variable. "Class outlook" and consciousness should not be confused. It should be emphasized that determining a woman's class and therefore her place in people's struggles by the class position of her father or husband acts on the false assumption that a woman's relationship to her father or husband is anything but the client-host relationship that it is. Women certainly profit from their association with the upper classes and may, although this is rare, wield bourgeois power; but all women, regardless of class, are oppressed by patriarchy, and the overwhelming majority of women, in terms of their work, are proletarian. The frequent disparaging reference to women in the women's liberation movement as "white middle class women" denies the special oppression of women and reinforces the idea that the only real or noteworthy oppression that women suffer is economic.

The whole nature of patriarchy is anti-thetical to the goals of socialism. Patriarchy is the socializer for capitalism; it prepares one group to accept the superiority and will of the other including a total division of character roles and labor which heavily favors one group. It is by its very nature divisive and hierarchical even in its most tempered forms. Its ideology forms the base of bourgeois hegemony and as long as it remains intact in any class, national group, or party it will have its effect of disintegration.

What then is the relationship of women and the women's movement to the socialist revolution? Clearly sexism must be destroyed in all its forms. The leadership and full participation of women is primary and central, a fact which necessitates a re-examination of socialist priorities. Formerly, some socialists have considered women's oppression to be marginal or secondary; in light of the urgency of the revolution in its "primary" forms and the overwhelming amount of work to be done, concerns which are considered marginal or secondary are not dealt with. The absurdity of such an absolutist position has become clear in practice; the struggle against sexism has been considered so "marginal" in theory that women have hesitated to struggle against it when it became primary in practice.

One of the reasons that the questions raised by the women's liberation movement have been considered marginal is the relationship of women to the means of production. The domestic labor of women in the home has no commodity or exchange value. While it is important to capitalist production it is not central and it is by nature isolated. Women are virtually absent from the heavy industry so important to the orthodox Marxists. Instead they are scattered here and there in low-skilled line jobs, service, secretarial and domestic labor. The strategy for revolution of many orthodox Marxists places the tactic of general strike in heavy industry in a central position. This tactic places in the vanguard role a group which is overwhelmingly white and male. A socialist revolution which speaks to the needs of all people must have the leadership and full participation of women.

The acceptance on the part of many socialist women of orthodox Marxism, including its inherent patriarchal outlook, and the failure of these women to see the urgency and primacy of women's issues and the women's movement must be struggled with. We must guard against susceptibility to the pressures and attacks of men, and our own desires to be considered "pure," "orthodox," "advanced," or "heavy" by their definition. On the other hand, the anti-theoretical and anti-male tendencies of many feminists, their refusal to see the necessity of socialist revolution in the destruction of patriarchy and their frequent failure to speak to the needs of working class and Third World women must also be struggled with. We must guard against bourgeois anti-communism, and individualism. Feminism is essential to the socialist revolution, socialist revolution is essential to feminism.

SISTERS UNITE!

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