

*Speech by Helke Sanders, representative of the Action Council*  
Dear Comrades,

I speak on behalf of the action committee for the liberation of women. The Berlin SDS has given us a delegation mandate, although only a few of us are members of it. We are speaking here because we know that we can only work together with other progressive organisations - and we think that today the SDS is the only one.

However, the precondition of this co-operation is that the SDS understands the specific problems of women, which means it must at least confront long suppressed conflicts within the SDS itself. By this we will broaden the dispute between the anti-authoritarian and CP factions, and confront at the same time both sides since in practice we have both of them against us - even though it may not be apparent from their theoretical claims. We will try to clarify our positions; we demand that our problems be discussed here. We will no longer put up with a situation in which women are allowed to say a word once in awhile, which - because you are anti-authoritarian - is heard out, but then ignored as you move on to the agenda.

We state that the SDS itself reflects the general conditions and relationships in society. Every effort is made to forestall or prevent anything which could help to confront this conflict between theory and reality, for this would inevitably result in a new orientation of SDS policies. This confrontation is avoided in a simple way. Namely, by separating out a certain sector of life from life in general and making this sector sacrosanct by calling it private life. With respect to its adherence to the taboo on discussion of "private life" the SDS is not at all different from the trade unions and the existing political parties. The result of this sacrosanctness is that the awareness of the conditions of exploitation under which women live is suppressed. This enables men to cling to their traditional identity - an identity won by patriarchy. One concedes to women freedom of speech but then does not analyse the reasons why they stand the test so badly, why they are so passive, why they are quite capable of pursuing SDS policy but at the same time incapable of setting it. (At the first day of the conference one woman spoke.) The suppression becomes complete when one points out those women who have reached a certain position within the SDS where they can be active.

It is never asked what price they have had to pay; it is overlooked that they reached these positions only by adapting to a principle of constant competition, a principle which, in fact, the men also suffer gravely and whose abolition is the goal of their activity.

EMANCIPATION UNDERSTOOD IN THIS WAY STRIVES ONLY FOR EQUALITY IN INJUSTICE AND THAT BY MEANS WHICH WE ALL OPPOSE: THE PRINCIPLES OF COMPETITION AND PRODUCTIVITY.

By the present separation between private life and social life, women are persistently thrown back into individual conflicts requiring solution in the private sector. Women are still being educated for private life, for the family, which, for its part, is dependent on the conditions of production against which we are struggling. Education for a specific role, the inculcated feeling of inferiority, the contradiction between their own expectations and the demands of society, all generate a constant feeling of guilt prompted by an inability to do justice to the many demands, for having to choose between alternatives which in each case involve the renunciation of vital needs.

Women seek their identity. By mere participation in struggles which don't directly touch their own conflicts, they cannot find their identity. This would be pseudo emancipation. They can only emancipate themselves if their own conflicts, which are suppressed into private life, are articulated. Most women are not political, because politics has hitherto always been defined one-sidedly, and their needs have never been taken into account. They are therefore forced to persist in their appeal to the authority of the Law, the authoritarian call for legislation, as they have not become aware of the fact that the realisation of their demands would break the system.

The group most easily politicised is educated women with children. These women are the most aggressive and they at least are vocal. Those women who today are in a position to study, do not owe this so much to the bourgeois emancipation movements as to economic necessity. As soon as these privileged women have children, they find themselves thrown back into old behaviour patterns which, thanks to their emancipation, they had already overcome. Their studies are discontinued or they are delayed, and these women's intellectual development comes to a standstill or is considerably reduced as a result of the demands of the family. Added to this is the insecurity arising out of the fact that they have not succeeded in resolving the conflict between being a blue-stocking and becoming a housewife; between building up a career (which is often paid for with a considerable loss of happiness) or becoming a woman in the sphere of consumption.

In other words, it is precisely these more privileged women who have learned through experience that the bourgeois road to emancipation is the wrong one, and who have also learned that they cannot emancipate themselves through the competitive struggle. They have learned that the general principle of productivity has become the decisive factor within existing conditions, and that the road to emancipation is preconditioned by the ends which determine it.

When these women have children they learn very quickly that all their privileges are of no use to them, and thus they are the first to be in a position to throw light on this scrap heap of social life; this is ~~the~~ synonymous with carrying the class struggle into married life and into similar relationships. Here the man finds himself in the objective role of the exploiter, or class enemy, which, of course, subjectively he does not want, but which has also been forced upon him by a society based on the productivity principle and which maps out for him the role he has to play.

Out of all this the following realisation occurred to the action committee for the liberation of women: We cannot solve the problem of the social oppression of women individually, and we cannot wait for its solution until after the revolution, as a mere political and economic revolution does not abolish the repression of private life, as is demonstrated in all socialist countries. We strive for living conditions which will eliminate competition between man and woman. This is only possible through the transformation of the relations of production and with it, of power relations, in order to create a truly democratic society.

As women with children display the greatest preparedness for solidarity and are most ready to be politicised, we concentrated our activity on their conflicts. This does not mean that we do not take seriously the conflicts of students without children, nor does it mean that in spite of the characteristics common to all oppressed women, we are not aware of the specific mechanisms of class oppression; it merely means that we want to work as effectively as possible and that we have to create a starting point which will permit us to approach the problem in a systematic and rational way.

Because we failed in our initial efforts to deal with these conflicts together with the SDS and within the SDS, we withdrew and worked on our own.

When we started half a year ago, most comrades made fun of us. Now they reproach us for having withdrawn; they try to prove to us that we have entirely wrong theories; they try to impute to us the opinion that women do not need men for their emancipation and similar idiocies, none of which we have ever maintained. They emphasise that they too are oppressed, which in any case we already know. We merely cannot see why we should any longer accept their oppression, with which they in turn oppress us, without defending ourselves against it. It is precisely because we are of the opinion that emancipation is only possible as an overall social emancipation that we are, after all, here. For it must be said at least once that society as a whole consists of more women than men, and it is high time that we raised the claims which flow from this fact, and demand that these claims be considered in the future. Should the SDS not be able to advance rapidly to this insight, then we shall have to embark on a power struggle - something we would much rather avoid as it would be a wasteful energy on our part. For we shall win this struggle - historically right is on our side.

We don't particularly like either the helplessness or the arrogance with which we are forced to appear here. We are helpless because we feel that we ought to be able to expect from progressive men understanding of the explosive nature of our conflicts. Our arrogance is the result of our insight that you are such blockheads that you cannot see that suddenly, without any help from you, people to whom you have never given a single thought have suddenly organised themselves, and moreover, in numbers which, if we were workers, you would take for the beginning of a new dawn.

Comrades! Your meetings are unbearable! You are riddled with inhibitions which you have to release as aggression against comrades who say something stupid or something you know already. These aggressions are only partially the result of insight into the stupidity of the other side. Why don't you at least admit that you are exhausted from the strain of the last year, that you don't know how to bear the stresses any longer, that you consume your physical and intellectual energies without getting any pleasure from them. Why don't you discuss, before you plan your campaigns, how they can be carried out? Why do you all buy Reich? Why do you speak here about class struggle and at home about the difficulties of orgasm? Is that not a subject for the SDS?

These repressions we will not tolerate any longer. So, in our self-imposed isolation, we did the following: we concentrated our work on women with children, because their situation is the worst. Women with children can only start to think about themselves again when they children don't constantly remind them of the failure of society. As politicised women are no longer interested in educating their children according to the principle of productivity, for the first time we took society's demands seriously, i.e. that the woman has to educate the children. This means that we refuse to continue educating our children according to the principles of competition and productivity, knowing that the maintenance of these principles is the precondition for the existence of the capitalist system.

We want to try now to develop models of a utopian society within existing society. But in this counter-society our own needs must at last find their place. Therefore, the concentration upon education is not an alibi for our own suppressed emancipation, but the precondition for a productive solution of our own conflicts. The main task is to prevent our children from being driven out to islands cut off from any social reality and to give them strength of resistance by supporting their own emancipation efforts, so that they are able to solve their own conflicts.