

FB, Costello 2, 16

STATEMENT OF POLITICAL DIFFERENCES WITH WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK GROUP I

INTRODUCTION

We decided to write this paper on our political disagreements with Wages for Housework Group I in Toronto, because these differences failed to come out at the conference. We hold both groups responsible for that. Ourselves, although our political confusion at that time was so massive that we were only beginning to see the political differences. And the other group, who is even more responsible because they knew their disagreements with us and the conference and refused to spell them out in New York.

We feel our disagreements must be a matter of public political debate. For too long political discussion has been warped by the credo of "sisterhood". We can no longer afford to be blackmailed by that. For what is "sisterhood" without struggle? And what is "sisterhood" without a perspective? In fact, the differences we have with the other group centre around fundamental questions of leadership and organization. These questions must be discussed by all of us.

The fact that we were unable to bring these points up in New York, and the other group was unwilling to, led to many women assuming that these differences were "personal". Most of us were under that impression for a long time too. That is why when Selma exploded the debate on Sunday afternoon we couldn't see what was at stake politically. But all the events surrounding the conference helped us change our minds.

Looking back now we can see things more clearly. We had overlooked the way they related to us last spring when we indicated an interest in working with them on wages for housework. At that time they tried to work with a couple of individuals from our group, but refused to work with our group as a whole. Most of us understood that in a context of a long involved history we've all had in a mixed political group 1½ years ago, where again political differences were not clarified, and that we thought gave them a right to be cautious of us.

But we began to wonder when, early in the fall, they applauded the difficulties our group was having in consolidating itself. Again they made overtures to a couple of us to work with them -- as individuals.

Then after the conference proposal was issued, they called us with much urgency on a number of occasions and pushed for last-minute meetings with us to discuss the pressing differences they had with the way the conference was conceived; the possibility of an international network with a public political statement being set up (which they opposed); and the need to establish Toronto's "uniqueness" and hence its need for separation from the International.

They were putting a lot of pressure on our group to draw up a statement with them outlining the above -- so that Toronto could present

a "united front" against the International in New York. We refused, however, because no such unanimity existed and because our group was, at best, confused about most of the questions at issue. We did, nevertheless, agree to support them in their efforts to raise their differences at the conference (see the "Statement on Organization" some of us signed with them that was distributed at the conference) because we were anxious to get at the root of what we knew had been causing so much tension between the two groups and which had always taken the form of attacks on Selma and Judy.

Once in New York, however, despite the fact that there were many opportunities for them to raise their disagreements for collective political discussion, they refused to do so openly. But there was endless caucusing among themselves, and numerous attempts to involve some of us in backroom debates. At one point, when our group agreed to meet with them, to confront them with the situation, they objected to Judy's presence at the meeting on the grounds that she was there as a member of the International and not as part of our group!

The conference was invaluable to our collective in beginning to change our understanding of wages for housework and how questions of leadership, organization, developing an international perspective etc. relate to it. The changes our collective has undergone are enormous. It is only now that we can write this paper. And we do so because we feel strongly that political differences cannot be reduced to personal attacks in private, but must be spelled out openly and publicly for collective debate.

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There are four basic areas of disagreement with Wages for Housework Group I. All are inter-connected, but we'll lay them out separately for the purposes of discussion. They are: (1) our relationship to the working class; (2) leadership; (3) the "public-private" debate (4) the International network.

1. OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORKING CLASS

Wages for housework as a political perspective begins with a fundamental re-definition of the working class. The traditional Marxist approach has always excluded women and other unwaged workers because we were not producing in the factory, and "sociological" approaches to class which have always reduced class to social stratification based on income levels. We reject both. The first because we have come to see the working class as all those who are forced to function for the self-expansion of capital in the entire social factory -- both waged and unwaged -- and who struggle not to. And the second because class is not a matter of the people divided by income levels and social status (see Women's Work at Home and in the Paid Labour Force or Wages and Housework, written by Angela Miles, a member of Group I), but of levels of social power based on the struggle to refuse to function for capital. It is

not as if capital arrives at an equitable distribution of social wealth based on the "objective" contribution of each member of society -- that is just what they want us to believe. The social wealth is not divided up by capital for the working class, to begin with. It is produced by the working class, stolen by capital, and then re-appropriated by the working class through struggle, or its refusal to accept capital's terms. Your wages are a measure of your power to force capital to give back what it has stolen from you through forced labour. To the various degrees of power in the working class there corresponds a hierarchy of wages. These divisions are a measure of capital's power over us all. We women are at the bottom because we labour without a wage, and that is both our fundamental powerlessness within the working class and the fundamental weakness of the entire working class vis a vis capital. The demand for a wage therefore, is our first fundamental lever of power because it is our refusal to function for capital as unwaged reproducers of labour power, and it is the class demand because it puts an end to the division between the waged and unwaged. Women's refusal is not only working class struggle, it is the heart of working class struggle because capital, on an international scale, plans its exploitation of labour power and at all points depends on the unwaged labour or women.

There's a class line between this and Angela's position in Wages and Housework which in reducing wages to income disconnects money from social power and, therefore, from class struggle, and links it instead to social status or to capital's "objective" distribution of social wealth. Money is seen as remuneration for work done rather than as the terrain for political battle between capital and the working class. When we demand wages for housework, we are not trying to gain recognition for our work in order to enhance our social status, we are not trying to gain equality with men, we are not trying to feel better about ourselves as housewives -- we are making a struggle (with the rest of the working class) for the power to destroy capital, which forces all of us to live and work for its survival and our exploitation.

As a Wages for Housework Collective, our commitment to developing this perspective is part of the process of defining our own class relation to capital and our possibilities of struggle. We are neither professional revolutionaries nor professional feminists who are analyzing the working class or women "out there". We are women. And we are working class. Which means we do not see ourselves as fundamentally different from the mass of women; we know that whatever else we may do for wages, we are still defined as women by the unwaged work which we, and all other women, do in the home. When we say "wages for housework" we don't mean wages for other women who are full-time housewives, we mean wages for ourselves as part of the mass of women struggling to refuse capital's exploitative control of our lives.

As women, and as working class, we see our commitment to building a class perspective which links the struggle of women (and men) internationally as an integral part of that struggle. Between those of us in the feminist movement and those of us outside it, there is not a class line but an organizational one. Both the existence of a women's movement and the development of a political perspective are in themselves a great source of power because they challenge the fundamental material condition for our exploitation as women which is isolation. The rise of the women's movement was and is an attack on capital's need to keep us divided. Those of us who function within it to develop a class perspective do so because it is a power for us and for all women everywhere. The tasks and goals we set for ourselves, both locally and as part of the international network, are part of the struggle of the working class internationally to build its power against capital by refusing the divisions which have always kept women weak vis a vis men, and the entire working class weak vis a vis capital. In short, it is part of the self-activity of the working class to develop its own organization in opposition to capital's.

2. LEADERSHIP

Within this framework the question of leadership arises. Most of the criticisms Group I has made of us locally and of the International centre around the fact that there is leadership and that it takes visible organizational forms.

Most of us agreed with their view before the conference that there was a serious "leadership problem". But we argued with them at the time that the New York conference was a way of breaking down the implicit leadership of Selma, Silvia and Judy. We thought the conference would give us an opportunity to develop positions collectively rather than individually. And that women would then be speaking about Wages for Housework from a network, rather than as individuals.

What we misunderstood at that time was the whole question of how a perspective develops and what it means for it to be "collectivized". We were making the same mistake as Group I in thinking that Wages for Housework was not already a developed political position which certain women held on the basis of women's struggle and the struggles of the working class internationally. Or that if it was, it wasn't "collective". In reality, the women who had already begun to develop a perspective were working through the International Feminist Collective and were not, in fact, speaking as individuals. What happened at the conference was a further "collectivizing" of the perspective with those who understood it better ("the leaders") discussing it with those who understood it less, drawing on our common struggles as women. As a result, more of us are now working together to develop the perspective

further in order to use it to build a movement.

We reject Group I's libertarianism which sees leadership as a capitalist evil which gives certain people arbitrary power over others. The "democratic" and "egalitarian" forms of organization which they see as the alternative amount to no organization at all and similarly no collective discipline and development. The problems of collective political development are complex, and leadership is certainly one of the complexities, but rejecting leadership is not a solution.

We feel that those who have greater experience and/or greater political clarity have the responsibility of taking the initiative and seeing that the task of developing the perspective and building a movement goes forward with the highest degree of coherence possible. The power that such people have is not arbitrary, and not over others -- it is a power to be used by others as a tool for collective political development. You cannot dispose of the problems that leadership creates by simply denying the need for leadership. You must begin by defining its functions, in terms of the political needs of building a movement, and then deal with the problems surrounding it in an ongoing way.

And by leadership we are not talking about fixed hierarchical structures which impose arbitrary decisions of superiors over us -- we rightly made a struggle against authoritarianism in the student movement -- but of recognizing that you cannot just posit "democratically" that we are all "equal" in terms of experience and political clarity. Our struggle is precisely against the fact that capital has divided us in a million different ways, and the way to overcome that is not by pretending that it isn't so!

Libertarianism is in fact another form of vanguardism. It ends up isolating the "leaders" from the rest and says that they are so qualitatively different that there is an absolute division between them and everyone else. Because they are so disconnected from the rest, leadership is/^{seen as} something extraneous. What is supposed to be a rejection of Leninism is in fact just one more version of it. To be "Leninist" or "vanguardist" means to see leadership as the role of professional revolutionaries who bring a "higher consciousness" to the working class from the outside. Libertarianism sees all leadership as "vanguardist" so that leaders are, by definition, "outside" the working class. In order to be part of the working class, you must fade into the vast undifferentiated mass of "the people". The "spontaneous" self-activity of "the people" needs no organization or leadership because that would mean accepting it from the outside.

We reject Leninism because we agree that the working class does not need anyone from the outside to bring it a "higher consciousness". But we do not equate Leninism with leadership: that is, we do not define leadership as something external to the working class.

Leadership is precisely part of the self-activity of the working class, or the process through which organizational forms are developed as part of working class struggle itself. And this is the fundamental political difference between us and Group I. If we exercise leadership and take initiatives in developing a political perspective from women's struggles we do not see ourselves as doing it from "outside" those struggles. Our daily experience as women is too compelling for that.

Their libertarian denial of structure and leadership, far from being an affirmation of working class self-activity, is in fact its very opposite. If you deny the need for organization within the working class you are de facto/^{accepting}capital's organization of the working class. There are no other alternatives. A working class perspective is based on the fact that capital can and will be destroyed as the working class builds its power through its own self-organization. The libertarian refusal of organization is a refusal of working class power. It betrays its fear that capital will always be there so that all we can really do is try to escape its alienating effects by creating "democratic" and "egalitarian" modes of life, etc. It does not believe that we can destroy capital, only that we can try to escape it. This is a profound denial of working class struggle which is based precisely on the fact that under capitalism no such escape is possible, and with communism no such escape will be necessary.

3. THE "PUBLIC-PRIVATE" DEBATE

Some of us have had a number of discussions with Group I about whether or not our two groups should "go public". Their position on the matter is totally contradictory. On the one hand, they have opposed our group functioning as a public reference point for Wages for Housework, claiming that it is "Leninist" and "vanguardist". They have said many times that they consider it "elitist" and "undemocratic" to define a political position and present it to others as a basis for working together. This follows from their assumptions about our (external) relationship to the working class and the consequences that has for leadership and organization. They have criticized us on numerous occasions: when one of us took a public speaking engagement; when we stated our intentions of writing our herstory for the New York conference; when we wrote a paper on Toronto hospital workers' struggle (they said we had no right to sign it as a group, even though a couple of us wrote it and we all discussed it); even when we responded as a group to the conference proposal from the New York collective.

On the other hand, they have also stated that they do see the necessity of going public (claiming it is a question of "timing"). And in the past year their own group has done everything from signing a welfare leaflet as a public group; to Angela debating a Trotskyist

on Wages for Housework at a public left meeting; to assuming the function, as a group, of deciding who's "into the perspective" in Toronto. (Last spring they refused to work with us as a group, because they wanted to judge each of us individually).

So what are they really saying?

Our feelings now about the whole "public-private" debate is that it is totally false. There is no other reason for us or anyone else to set up a Wages for Housework group except for the purpose of functioning as a public reference point. A political perspective is not a private possession for one's personal edification. It is a tool with which to do battle against capital, and that is not a "private" matter -- it is something which is done on a mass scale internationally. Going through a preliminary period of internal consolidation does not in the least alter the basic fact that a group's existence, whether local or international, is tied to the public task of developing a political perspective in order to build a movement.

4. THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

Group I has opposed the International network on the basis of the question of leadership vs. "local autonomy". This is virtually the same as their criticism of us locally.

The main thrust of their position is that Judy, Selma and Silvia are the embodiment in some way of the International. They said these three were "elitist" and "undemocratic" in that they wanted to develop the network along the model of the Fourth International and/or "male-leftist" lines -- i.e. that a rigid political line would be imposed that defines people "in or out" of the perspective.

Their criticism of the New York conference is an illustration. It was called, they felt, from "the top down" by Silvia, who as a member of the "elite" convened it without consulting other centres as to: (1) the desirability of a conference in the first place; (2) the criteria for who should be invited; and (3) the idea of a network with a public political/^{position} on Wages for Housework. They felt this violated the idea of "local autonomy" which sees each centre as being responsible for developing the perspective for their area -- and nothing further. Any commitment to an International can do nothing but interfere with local developments. One of their members refused to come to New York because, as a mother engaging in struggles around daycare with women in her neighbourhood, she would find nothing in her own interests at the conference!

While we agree that an International perspective couldn't even be developed without reference to "local" struggles -- we believe they fail to see how fatal it is to disconnect yourself organizationally from the power of an international movement.

Capital is international. The struggle against capital is international. Wages for Housework is an international perspective. By developing our analysis with other women in other places we strengthen our common struggle against capital. And that is part of the self-activity of the working class internationally.

Power to the sisters and therefore to the class!

-- Wages for Housework Collective
Toronto

(Formerly known as Wages for
Housework Group II)

- Betty Burcher
- Lissa Donner
- Paula Fainstat
- Frances Gregory
- Judy Ramirez
- Patrice Simister