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The Power of Women Collective
Montreal.

July 4th, 1975.

Dear Sisters,

These three letters are from the present Montreal Collective,
(with the exception of Clare Mian), and Kathy Parker and Susan
Wheeler who were members of the Collective at the time of
the Montreal Conference and who have since gone to Boston
and Toronto where they continue to be involved in the
struggle for Wages for Housework.

Love and Power

From the Montreal

Power of Women Collective.

An Open Letter to Silvia Frederici:

Dear Silvia,

This response to your statement has taken the form of a letter since there seems little point in producing yet another statement in response to your statement, etc. In short, as far as we are concerned, the essence of the statement produced by the Montreal group still stands. Though your own statement clearly represents a different interpretation of the events of the conference, it also reflects an orientation to our movement -- an orientation which has been criticized by numerous groups and individuals and which was the central theme of our own analysis of the events of the conference. Part of this orientation is manifested in your obviously profound distrust of those whom you refer to as "sisters". Many of us began to feel this distrust at the conference and we were disturbed by it. We were disturbed at the conference not because distrust is "not nice" nor because it is "intimidating". We were disturbed because we have all seen distrust operate in political movements and because we know its dangers. Distrust is a human phenomenon bred under the conditions of capitalist society. In a political context, this human phenomenon muddies political issues, clouds political judgement, and gives rise to organizational structures with which none of us who are committed to Wages for Housework want to live.

Let us give some concrete examples of how distrust has already led to the drawing of political implications which simply have no basis in reality.

Your statement, Silvia, ends thus:

"The Montreal Collective must explain to us why they have included the address of the "Book Group" in the mailing list and why in the first place they have decided to ignore the decision made in Montreal by the majority of us?"

Well, in the first place, their names have NOT been included - a quick look at the mailing list will serve to verify this fact. Their names were not included because we do not make the distinction between Wages for Housework and the Montreal group which you seem to make. We are Wages for Housework just as every other group in the network is Wages for Housework. As Wages for Housework, we act to represent the decisions in which we as members of an International participate. As a Wages for Housework group, we feel it our right and our duty to participate in the discussions necessary for the on-going development of a movement. Sometimes this participation takes the form of criticism. Criticism from a member of the International is qualitatively different from criticisms made by the left or by the groups and individuals who are not part of Wages for Housework. Criticisms from within the International are predicated upon constructive concern. They are not sabotage.

You say you are not interested in discussing the "mistakes" of the public meeting, would rather talk about the peculiar view the Montreal women hold of WFH and whom they are trying to reach. We would suggest that rather than make grossly misleading attacks on the Montreal group you would make some effort to find out what our actual position is. It was never our intention to attract the local left and quite honestly we

never gave a thought to the question of inviting men. Our organization for further meeting has taken and will continue to take quite a different form. Since the conference men have not been invited to our meetings nor would we consider inviting them in the future. Once our mistakes vis a vis the Montreal conference were made, it certainly didn't help our own credibility to refuse to handle questions that were asked in all sincerity by those outside the perspective - and here we are not referring to the leftists who insist on giving us raps about their politics. The latter should without any doubt be smartly silenced. It is within the context of replying to these concerned questions that we objected to the intervention which was made of the Friday night public meeting and not because we were pleading for local autonomy or the presence of men.

We understand your accusation, Silvia, as human error. It is a human error which grows out of distrust and which reaps more distrust. It is a human error with serious political consequences and that is why we bring it up despite your conversation with Clare. Under the circumstances, a more public statement from you with regard to this matter would seem to be in order.

It is certainly true that for our group the conference was an exploratory one, but not at all true that we were not sure whether we wanted Wages for Housework. We had no doubt whatever in this respect.

WE MUST DEMAND THE WAGE. WE WANT THE MONEY.

WFH must not, however, as you have so clearly stated yourself, be reduced to a thing, a lump of money but must be viewed as a political perspective. (p. 12 Notebook #1) In this regard it would seem clear to us that you grossly misrepresented Susan Wheeler's view. However, she will deal with personal allegations herself. If there are some women, as you say, who do not agree we should demand the wage, then of course they represent a different political perspective and should leave because they are not in the same struggle.

As for our discussion of manipulation this far, it is becoming obvious that the accusations can fly back and forth forever. For the purposes of clarification, however, two points are in order:

1) We did not accuse anyone of manipulating anyone at the conference, but rather suggested that the structure of the discussion was such that it became manipulative regardless of any individual's intentions.

And within this context:

2) We suggested that people voted on issues out of a fundamental agreement with the perspective and a loyalty to the International movement for Wages for Housework. This is qualitatively different from your suggestion that we voted out of the fear of losing the power of the International.

As for the substance of your statement - your discussion of the various levels of commitment - "sureness" - is a frighteningly clear development of the kind of political thinking to which our statement was originally addressed. The first questions that come to mind are:

How does one demonstrate sureness? How do the rest of us judge when someone is sure enough? What is the line (Is there one?) which separates sureness

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about a perspective from loyalty to a party line? Presumably, major policy decisions, questions of organizational structure and international strategy would be discussed and decided upon in the group "for sure people only"; In other movements, such a group is given the title "steering committee" or "executive committee" - will we continue to refer to our group (euphemistically) as the "sure people" group forever? It doesn't really matter. The fact of this group's existence contradicts our professed adherence to a non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian structure.

Indeed, there are differences within our movement and they reveal themselves most clearly in our discussions of organizational structures. Contrary to your intimation that Montreal women are not ready to discuss organizational strategy, we have been calling for this discussion for months now (witness our statement itself) in the hope that such discussion will finally reveal the political differences which are at the root of the disagreements about organization.

You have pointed to what you feel are these essential differences; but your analysis would appear to be based upon a series of remarks made by various people, (some named, some happily anonymous) taken completely out of context and then lumped together in the same "camp". To derive the political positions of others from randomly chosen sentences is at best misleading, at worst it is dangerous.

We need more detailed considerations, more fully developed expositions of what people are actually thinking. The Montreal groups is preparing a paper which seeks to further elaborate our own political position and once again we urge other groups throughout the network to do the same so that we can begin the Chicago conference with a discussion of clearly defined positions, in an atmosphere, is not of agreement, at least of trust and mutual understanding.

In Sisterhood,

The Montreal Power of Women

TO EVERYONE IN THE WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK NETWORK

1 July, 1975

Dear Sisters:

In April, the Montreal group circulated 2 statements concerning the February conference held in Montreal--one signed by 6 women, including myself, and the other signed only by Clare Mian. The Philadelphia Wages for Housework Action Group sent everyone a statement "in reply to and support of" the statement by the majority of the Montreal group on 1 May. Silvia Federici then circulated a critical reply to the Montreal statement on 17 May.

There is obviously a debate going on, unfortunate only insofar as it has been limited to a few groups and 1 individual out of the many groups and individuals who are part of the network, but I have no doubt that much more will be written and circulated before our next conference in Chicago. What is alarming is Silvia Federici's wish to cut off all debate completely at this point, saying that those who do not agree with her do not even belong at the Chicago conference since, by her definition, they are not involved in the same struggle and do not have the same political perspective. If those who wish to prevent any political debate in Chicago are successful, it looks like there will never be any possibility for debate within the network since where else can it take place if not during our conferences? To insist, as some have done, that the only discussion we need to engage in during conferences is organizational is to ignore the fact that many, if not most of us, want something more. To further insist that this indicates that we are not interested in struggling for the wage is simply untrue. For any debate to take place we must agree on one thing: that their perspective is the political struggle we have chosen to organize our power as women, and belongs to all women who struggle with us for the wage, i.e. no individual or group within the network should have the power to act as judge of anyone else's political development (eg. Silvia's distinction between those who are "sure" and those who are not). Political clarity, I would like to point out, has nothing to do with knowledge, understanding or experience in the way Silvia uses the expression; when she says that someone is "politically clear", she means ~~that~~ absolute political agreement. Used in this way, "political clarity" obscures the fact that someone can be quite developed politically and still have certain disagreements with Silvia. In other words, to disagree with Silvia Federici should not mean that we are politically underdeveloped. And I most strongly object to the charge of leninism now being made by those who seek to gather to themselves the elite powers historically associated with leninist centralism.

This having been said, and as a preamble to continuing substantive debates around political and strategic questions as they arise, (eg. the nature of the network we are building), let me clear the way of some of the trivial smears and distortions that Silvia Federici raises against my credibility .

To support her contention that I do not have the same political perspective and therefore do not belong at the Chicago conference, Silvia Federici cites examples of heresy or, where none can be found, she assures us that the heresy really exists but it is hidden or "mystified." It is now clear to me however that it is Silvia Federici who is involved in mystification. For example, she accuses me of being an enemy of the perspective because I said that I prefer the Montreal wfh button to the New York design, simply because I like the feminist clenched-fist symbol and what it implies in terms of our history. She ignores the fact that the Montreal button has "Wages for Housework" written on it very clearly. Although some of us are critical of certain aspects of the feminist movement, it has never been monolithic and can not simply be written off completely. The perspective has always been identified as a revolutionary Feminist perspective, and both Selma James and Silvia Federici herself in their writings have drawn from feminist concepts, for example the anti-left struggle first articulated in the '60s by the women's movement. Silvia Federici may perhaps be less interested in feminism

page 2...

than others of us are--that is her right and this is not an accusation--but to say that a preference for a button that clearly reads "Wages for Housework" is really being against the perspective is not only incomprehensible but some kind of magical trick.

Anyone who has differences is not interested in mystifying them-- what would be the point? Presumably those who have differences are more interested in gathering support for their point of view, and this can not be done in secret. The network is based on our common struggle around demanding and winning wages for housework. I have participated in that struggle by speaking to various groups and on the radio, by writing articles--always putting forward wages for housework, why we want it, what it means for women and what it means for capital. The "differences" Silvia Federici is so anxious to root out have absolutely nothing at all to do with opposition of any kind ~~at~~ to demanding and winning wages for housework and she is not able to cite a single example of any reservations on my part. The petty slurs against the Montreal group, as well as those directed to me personally, are simply camouflage--even if every incident she describes were true (and this is certainly not the case), that would still not constitute proof that the Montreal group is against demanding wages for housework, it simply indicates that Silvia Federici considers us dangerous. Why does she think we are so dangerous? Not because we are against wages for housework, but because we oppose the authoritarian direction the network is taking. It is very easy to fall into authoritarianism, in spite of our claims to the contrary, simply because authoritarian structures and the politics behind them are the institutions of capital & itself as well as the forms and political content of the traditional left which calls itself anti-capitalist although the "revolution" they are trying to create itself is simply a more ideologically coherent form of exploitation: we will still be working, we will still be exploited, but it is supposed to make a difference that now we work for the "socialist state" instead of capital. This is obviously not the vision of the future implicit in our ~~our~~ perspective of wages for housework; I simply want to point out that both capital as well as the "anti-capitalists" create and maintain authoritarian relationships. And unless we conscientiously set out to build alternatives we can fall into the same traps.

When I speak to anyone about wages for housework, I emphasize the power that both the wage itself and the struggle for the wage can give to women to challenge the capitalist organization of labour which keeps us exploited. This is somewhat different from trying to prove--as some have done--that women "deserve" the wage because of all the work we do which, in my opinion, approaches the question from a moralist point of view and actually tends toward the capitalist logic of a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work." I prefer to discuss the perspective in terms that make it clear that no one under capitalist receives a "fair day's pay," and that we are interested in building our power to end our work, not to get paid for it, and continue doing it. This is particularly significant because this is precisely the way in which we can make links with demands of women already receiving a wage for work outside the home. It enables us to make it clear that it is the whole wage system that exploits us, either because we receive no wage at all, or only a small one. It emphasizes the point that on one hand we produce everything and get very little in return and on the other that we have the power to destroy it all. I see wages for housework as a way of winning the social wealth necessary to change our lives, altering the power relations that keep us in a position of exploitation and destroying the notion that our exploitation (unwaged housework) is the essence of our femininity.

I am sure that there are probably women who would disagree with the way I present the perspective, just as I am critical of their approach. That does not change the fact that we are all struggling for wages for housework. Our disagreements are based on differences as to what is the best way to build our struggle; and that does not change

page 3...

the fact that we all want to build our struggle. My major objection to Silvia Federici's paper is the way she identifies her ideas as the only correct ideas; anyone else with questions or criticisms she automatically declares with an enemy of the perspective or else too backward or politically unsophisticated to understand. I have no objection if Silvia Federici wants to put forward her point of view in the network or use her own particular approach when speaking publicly. But I do object very strongly to the notion that any other way of approaching the perspective is simply wrong. And ~~further~~ furthermore I would argue that the more limited the perspective becomes by excluding anyone that Silvia Federici decides is wrong, the less change there is of building a really strong international movement around wages for housework.

Please take note of my new address and please send criticisms and comments.

In love and struggle,

Susan Wheeler

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To Silvia,

I was a member of the Montreal group until I moved to Boston at the end of April. I'd like to respond to your letter of May 17 regarding our group and the conference.

I don't know if any of us really said it was premature to discuss organisational matters "because the perspective isn't developed". I do know that after the conference the group expressed disappointment that this international conference proposed a strategy no more detailed and organized than a "propaganda campaign". We were all committed to wages for housework before the conference, though the conference certainly consolidated my understanding of the wage demand. Because so many interpretations of the phrase "money is power" were presented I could explain it to myself better than the literature available before the conference was able to. Nevertheless I had always thought the money necessary.

The distinction between demanding the wage-- campaigning to win the cash and the power it will bring us -- and using the perspective for consciousness raising is very clear in my mind. The Montreal group does not represent those who think the demand is "economistic". They agreed there are important political differences between what was presented as the Book Group's politics and those of the International. They are saying that any differences should have been made clear before we expelled the group instead of afterwards if we were expelling them for political reasons. They saw this as symptomatic of the false simplicity of many of the debates at the conference.

Susan Wheeler's statement about the buttons does not represent the anti-wage position. She said she preferred our button because it showed ties to the women's movement. The button with money, and without the power of women sign, could also be seen as trying to cater to the left. A button with both would be a better visual characterization of the movement (like the one on the back of the record from Italy). The statement that the demand is qualitative rather than quantitative is very familiar, because you yourself say that in the article "Wages Against Housework/When Wages for Housework Becomes a Perspective", (the most recent and complete article available about the demand:

The waged worker in struggling for more wages challenges his social role but remains within it. When we struggle for wages we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role. In the same way there is a qualitative difference between the struggles of the waged worker and the struggles of the slave for a wage against that slavery.

You also state that the demand is not a thing but a perspective.

I do not believe that any mistakes we made in organizing the public meeting were due to a distorted view of wages for housework. "Wages for Housework" was omitted from the poster because we thought a lot of people had misconceptions about the movement. A number of women in Montreal were known to think that the movement only wanted to raise consciousness with the demand, "using" women that really wanted the money, because of a widely quoted criticism in a local magazine which misrepresented us. Others assumed we wanted the wage from the husband. We would not have the ~~same~~ same handicap now that the movement is better known in Montreal.

This was the first public meeting we had arranged besides Selma's speaking engagement in the fall where there was no problem with men. We just did not think about men coming, though we should have. We were or-

ganizing an open meeting not a political group. All our publicity work was directed towards women not involved in the left, both women at large through the radio and newspapers, and toward active feminists through all the local women's centers. It was not planned in such a way that it had to become a show for the local left. The two women who were responsible for most of the leftist argument were very active in a broad-based women's organization at McGill that arranged for our rooms and posters. No planning would have kept them from coming. Other questions that questioned the perspective should have been expected and answered in an open meeting. Finally, it is not true that the Book Group was on the mailing list.

These bits of circumstantial "evidence" are not proof of opposite political tendencies. Everyone at the conference emphasized different aspects of the wage demand which appealed to them personally. I counted at least seven different explanations of the wage demand at the open meeting before the Montreal conference. This is why we come together to have a conference.

The Montreal group emphasizes the qualitative and feminist aspects of the international wage demand. These aspects make the demand a perspective and make us different from the trade unionists, women's rights groups etc. which will soon latch on to our demand. This is called leninist, while splitting in order to clarify politics in the leninist tradition is considered practical and efficient and so in some way not leninist? If any kind of difference in emphasis in demanding the wage is considered an "opposite political tendency" and pushed out of the international, where is the line between us and the "vanguard" marxist-leninist parties?

Wages for housework,
(Being power to women and the class)

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