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THE CRISIS OF POWER

We are living through two crises. The working class, created one, and capital the other. First, the crisis we have caused. Miners in Britain, by going back to the eight-hour day, threaten not only the subsidised power supply to other industries, but the whole State policy of containment of wages on which capitalist power now rests. The miners' wage demand is therefore a highly political matter. The Financial Times understands that, whatever miners think of what they're doing, "The objective fact is that in the process of getting their money they cannot avoid damaging the economy, frustrating a central policy of the Government and seriously undermining, if not actually destroying, its ability to govern. They are therefore engaged in political action whether they like it or not." (Fri. Nov. 30, '73)

They know it and they like it. And, unlike the Financial Times, when we say "they" we refer not only to men who mine coal but to women whose work is to renew the miner daily destroyed by mining. Experience teaches us that industrial workers, largely but not exclusively men, are deeply dependent on community support for struggles in the workplace. In the Black community support has sometimes come from shopkeepers, even landlords. In both the black and white communities, it has come from friends and family, and first of all wives. The overtime mining ban began before Christmas. One of the State's hopes was that women would clamour for the ritual whereby (after days of intensive female labour) for one day a year the working class family lives it up and makes believe it's not scrambling to stretch the pay packet. If the women in the mining towns had turned thumbs down on the overtime ban, it would have been broken.

These women have behind them the experience of organising autonomously during the last great miners' strike. They were the ones who told the men when the strike was won, "Don't go back. Don't go back down the mines. Don't go." To go less is a step to not going at all.

The miners' action (which is to say, their refusal to act overtime) forced the State to initiate the three-day week. Whether or not the government were lying about coal stocks is irrelevant. (If they'd told the complete truth it would have been for the first time in history.) What they hoped to achieve was, first, to be less vulnerable to miners' demands - either to keep going on what stocks existed or to stockpile or to last till spring and warmer weather or to give them time to import coal and build up stocks.

Secondly, they are counting on workers in a weaker position, squeezed by the three days' pay, being demoralised and putting pressure on the miners. Where workers have gained a five-days'-pay guarantee, three days working is an increase of power by two days a week. Where they have not - in the smaller factories so many of which employ women, or where the wage is dependent on bonus not included in a guaranteed basic - individuals and families could be in desperate straits..

Thirdly, they know that if industrial workers are squeezed by capital at one end, this can be passed on and absorbed by women at the other. We are told to save power in the home so others can keep working. The feminist translation of that statement is: work harder under more difficult conditions in the home so we can continue to exploit you and your husband in the factory at the "normal" rate. Women are the first to do without, even when the State gives us the invitation to deprive our own needs more subtly.

In any case, millions of workers will go on working a six- or even seven-day week. Housewives are the first of these. Mum will have to cope with the kids sent home from unheated schools, and a man around the house waiting for the meal he'd be buying at the factory canteen. The food industry keeps going, in factories and in homes, and so does the medical industry, in hospital factories and in homes. Teachers must send the kids home in order to refuse the blackmail from which they, like nurses and other service workers, have suffered.

That's one way of turning the three-day week from a discipline of the working class to its opposite - an extension of our power. There are other ways too. Some workers whose work week is Thursday to Saturday have won overtime pay or even have refused Saturday work as not part of "normal working".

The revolutionary potential of even some workers being "forced" into three-day working has been sniffed most strongly by those watchdogs of capital, the trade unions. The negotiations between Heath and the TUC have been provoked by the need of both parties. The TUC cannot openly promise working class obedience; that kind of exposure would be dangerous and on this score the government is very understanding. Heath's fear is that the TUC cannot deliver working class obedience because workers have been moving beyond trade union grasp and mediation of the struggle. Len Murray, new head of the TUC, points with statesmanship to an obvious truth: you have no choice but to accept our initiative because ultimately you have no other and cannot have any other; if workers are to be disciplined, there is nobody but us to do it.

The second crisis, the crisis within the working class, rests here. With the single outstanding exception of the class struggle in the Middle

East, which has provoked an oil shortage to make coal even more indispensable, the mining community has been going it alone. Other struggles by transport, hospital, auto, engineering workers, squatters, tenant strikers, and men, women and children, black and white, fighting police and courts, have been kept neatly compartmentalised by trade unions. (Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW goes further and suggests that engineering workers fight factory by factory. That's how they lost in the Midlands last time so he suggests they try it again.) Help has come internationally through the interlocking of capitalist production and its world market. Nationally we are still too divided for joint consultations, let alone strategy-making from industry to industry, from community to community and from industry to community, outside of the apparatus of trade unions.

The process of lessening the grip of this institution has been greatly accelerated since the 71-72 miners strike. This is a measure of working class confidence in itself. The next step must be the formation of networks that cross the rigid barriers of capitalist organisation nationally and internationally. Only such a network can take the power that capital seems less and less able to wield.

This network doesn't exist because those of us who are traditionally weak - housewives, factory wives, office wives, shop assistants, hospital workers - have not yet shown the most powerful sections of industry by the strength of our own struggle, that we are a point of power for them. In our "absence" they remain too dependent on "working class" organisations who, by reinforcing divisions among us, keep us all linked to their negotiations. The rhetoric of the Labour Party's "Back to work with Labour" is trade union policy. (This, by the way, is called scabbing.) That the housewife is working is irrelevant to them; we aren't strong enough yet for them to offer to negotiate **for** us. If we were that would weaken the unions and their allies considerably.

The Communist Party, for example, claimed on television recently that if the government had accepted its energy policy of a couple of years back, it wouldnt face a crisis today. Friends like that are enemies.

But there is a source of power - a connection between waged, low waged and unwaged which, while not guaranteeing victory, ensures against defeat. The ruling class can't get scabs (except the TUC and CP variety). That is, it can't get other workers who will massively do work we may refuse to do. The unemployment which capital and its State thought would undermine the wages struggle and further divide us hasn't worked. Enoch Powell is further from becoming prime minister. Matter of fact, it's worked in the opposite way. Where during the thirties unemployed workers marched to demand jobs, during the seventies low-paid jobs go begging when thousands are not working. Absenteeism has not appreciably declined. People are not cowed but angry and demanding. And what they are demanding more of is money, in the form of direct wages, housing, Family Allowance and SS. The confidence of the waged to demand money is based largely on the knowledge that the unwaged will not scab, in fact are more intent on finding struggles to get money without working than on working to get money.

The miners, by putting capital in crisis, have demonstrated how political the wage struggle is. The same Financial Times article goes on to say:

"... any single body or pressure group which makes radical demands for a re-distribution of resources in its favour and has the power to enforce them, whether against private or public employers, must automatically be setting itself up in opposition

to Government and the will of Parliament... The upshot is an irreversible politicisation of economic processes."

Women - wives, sisters, daughters, mothers in or out of the mining community - will have to demonstrate how political is the wage for us who have been working unwaged for so long. Last year in Britain saw a mass campaign for Family Allowance to be increased and stay in the hands of women. That was a good beginning for us, but it was only a beginning. It was not enough yet to establish the kind of power which would make us a reference point for miners and other men workers. Making our own autonomous power felt must result in the possibility of a strong working class network of strategy and action.

The housewife, which is every woman's activity in varying degrees, must find her own "power to enforce" based on her own "radical demands for a re-distribution of resources" (otherwise known as wages). Many of us are already in waged employment, and the ruling class may drive more of us to increased quantities of unsocial work, let alone in unsocial hours; will try, in other words, to get us to scab on ourselves. We must strengthen our power of refusal.

The working class crisis is also, then, a crisis of energy, not to produce commodities but to produce a higher level of struggle. To the degree that we pool our energy as women to overcome our crisis, to that degree we deepen the crisis into which we have thrown the ruling class. Although the opposite is not true, power to the sisters is power to the brothers.