

PRESENTATION ON AUTONOMY FROM TORONTO CONFERENCE - Judy Quinlan

In making an analysis of lesbians we start from the point that all lesbians are housewives. Our struggle is the same as that of all women, and that struggle is wages for housework. We add that this starting point is the same for understanding ALL divisions among women, not just lesbian and straight.

But stating this fact alone only gives us the starting point. Because we are also acutely aware of the fact that there is a power division between lesbians and straight women. At first glance we can see that lesbians have less power than straight women in this society. So, the next question becomes what to do about this power division.

Well, we could talk about it alot, hoping to overcome it by natural understanding. This is what the organized women's movement recommends (also Playboy). But to adopt this strategy is to assume that the division exists only in our own heads- that it is a matter of consciousness alone. Since we are analysing it from a wages for housework perspective we know that the working class has never created its own divisions, so obviously this tactic is no good.

Another option is organizing ourselves on the basis of this power division alone- organize as lesbians in reaction to and against the power of straight women. This is the strategy of the lesbian separatist movement. But to do this would be to assume that resolution of the power division is a hopeless dream; that therefore the difference between lesbians and straight women is 'natural' or contained somewhere in our genes. Our own experience as both lesbians and straight women tells us that this isn't true. To organize from a position of powerlessness alone is a hopeless battle. This applies to all purely separatist struggles, whether the division is along sexual lines, national, or racial. We reject this strategy, too.

So, if the power difference is not natural, if it is not created by the working class, then there is only one place left that it could come from, and that's capitalism. This is the logic that led us, as lesbians, to Wages for Housework in the first place.

But after it is established that there is a power division between lesbians and straight women, and that this power division is created and enforced by capitalism, the next question we are forced to ask is WHY ME? After all, it makes no more sense to divide the working class according to who you go to bed with than according to what sort of toothpaste you use. Capital doesn't waste its time and energy creating unnecessary structures. There is only one reason that capital would create a division between lesbians and straight women and that would be if lesbians were a threat to state power. We know that for a struggle to threaten capital, it must be massive and a struggle for the wage. We maintain that the lesbian movement is both these things.

I want to make it clear right now that when we talk about the lesbian movement, we are NOT talking about lesbian feminism alone and we are not talking about gay rights alone. These are only the flotsam on the crest of the wave. We are talking about the massive movement of lesbians out of our isolation, out of our invisibility, or, as we put it ourselves, out of the closets. It is a recent movement (although lesbians have EXISTED forever), initiated and spurred on by our witnessing and being part of the struggles of black people and youth, and very strongly the women's movement in its broadest sense. It is a movement out of our isolation and specifically an attempt to situate ourselves in the general class struggle (we want to win too!). This we are still doing. We have established that the lesbian movement is massive, but how is it a struggle for the wage?

We have talked alot about how lesbianism is a refusal of work, about how it is lower productivity, about how we lose access to a man's wage, about how it is a different set of working conditions from straight women's in some senses. All these things are true. At the opening of this conference, Selma James and Silvia Federici talked about ourselves, our labour, being wealth in the purest sense of the word. And what else is lesbianism, then, but a struggle to reappropriate ourselves, our labour. A struggle to not be consumed in the job of production and

and reproduction of labour power? Our labour, ourselves are wealth. And lesbianism is a fight for that wealth.

We can see that as lesbians are coming out of the closets and declaring our existence to the world, the power division is being enforced even more strongly. We know that it will exist as long as capitalism exists, but we want to understand why, at this point in time, there is such a concentrated attempt to recreate our isolation, to push us back into the closets. Obviously because we are fighting to get out, but why are they so worried? NOT, surely, because lesbianism is 'catching'. NOT because they are worried that we will organize straight women to reappropriate their own sexual labour out of the hands of capital, and into their own control. On the contrary, they are worried because when we make a struggle AS LESBIANS, we are exposing the fact that ALL women are fighting to reappropriate our sexual labour. This is a threat of an autonomous lesbian movement, and this is the power that we bring to ALL women. And this is the reason that we must remain autonomous, so that this power isn't lost in the shuffle (Total collapse of the lesbian struggle into the rest of the women's movement is part of the state's plan for us, not part of our plan for ourselves).

Lesbians in the Wages for Housework movement are not isolated from the general lesbian movement. In fact, we ARE that movement as much as any other lesbian. What we are doing by being involved in Wages for Housework is carrying on the job that the lesbian movement set out to do in the first place- that of situating ourselves within the class struggle, so that we, too, can win. This is the power that WFH brings to us- to all lesbians.

This is the rationale for our autonomy within the Wages for Housework movement. Our job now, as lesbians, is to give organizational form to the lesbian movement, so that we can resist the push back into isolation, and therefore to resist the attack the state is making on ALL women by dividing us. (I like the word counter-attack). As Wages Due, we are a reference point for the struggles of all lesbians- a focus to lift these struggles out of their defensive, isolated position, and put at their disposal the power of the movement of the entire working class.

There are some obvious organizational implications of this paper. First, because we are starting from the fact that our struggle is the same as all women, then the Wages for Housework organizations are the organizations of that struggle. This means that our fight is the campaign for the wage internationally, as it is for all women. We are subject to the same discipline as all members of our respective groups. We accept the same responsibility for making the campaign. We see our specific task among lesbians as an integral part of that campaign, and our own lives and experiences make it a priority within our own local organizing practices. decisions.

We are autonomous in several senses. As Wages Due we are responsible for our own internal organization. We are responsible for our relationship with our local organization, and our job is to make sure that it represents our politics (the politics of both Wages Due and the entire collective). It is our responsibility to make sure that the lesbian struggle is understood within the Wages for Housework network, so that it is represented from the point of view of our common interest, our common perspective, not from the point of view of capital. We bring to the WFH movement the power of our struggle, and therefore the responsibility of understanding this power, appropriating it, circulating it, and building it.

In Toronto we are building a network among lesbian women on a Wages for Housework basis. It is not necessary that these women join the committee, or Wages Due. We are finding the networks that already exist among lesbians and bringing them in contact with each other. When we talk with lesbians the stress is on the power of fighting our isolation by building the power of our own movement. This is the main part of our job now, the job of building the campaign.

Up until this point we have focussed mainly on internal organization, because this was necessary for us to begin to break the stranglehold of our own isolation (see Francie Wyland's paper on Separatism, also presented at this conference), and on attempting to define our place as lesbians (see Lesbianism and Power- Ruth Hall, Wages Due London, and Fucking is Work, W.D.Toronto). We have moved a long way with these tasks, and now we know that the only way we will get a better grip on our own struggle is to take it 'to the streets'. We are doing this.