

Lesbian Autonomy and the Gay Movement

Wages Due Lesbians are a group of Toronto lesbian women who are part of the Wages for Housework campaign. Wages Due did not send an official delegation to the Kingston Conference on the May 24th weekend. The following paper outlines their reasons for that decision and the need for lesbian autonomy within the gay movement.

From the time we are children our personalities, and therefore our sexuality, are molded to fit the unwaged work that capitalist society forces on women. We are trained to service others - men, children, the sick, the old - by denying our own needs and performing a free "service of love". This servitude is organized through the nuclear family and enforced on us by men. Because they have higher wages men have the power to command our work, including our sexuality.

Our sexuality, therefore, is anything but a "free zone" that we can determine at will. Any control we have over any area of our lives we gain only through struggle. And we struggle constantly. Our struggle to be lesbian defies that discipline that would tie us to heterosexual relationships. Women's fight against dependence on men, against isolation from each other, against being able to have children only within the confines of the nuclear family, and against our poverty, are all struggles against the position of powerlessness that unwaged housework puts us in.

At the heart of our fight against unwaged housework is our rebellion against the heterosexual control of our sexuality that affects all of us whether we are lesbian or straight, female or male. As long as our sexuality is deformed by unwaged servitude in the home and low paid servitude outside, the enslavement of those who enforce our work - men - is also guaranteed. The price men pay for their power over us is their own daily exploitation as wage slaves. Our dependence on them ensures their dependence on capital, and guarantees capital's control over us all.

To the degree to which women don't have sexual choices, men's choices are limited. One reason why gay men are so vilified is because the male identity is so bound up with dependence and weakness - with wagelessness - that gay men, in taking on female attributes, take on powerlessness, and subject themselves to some of the scorn usually reserved for women. Sexual liberation begins with women's refusal of housework, with our increased exclamation of our time, our energy, our bodies, our sexuality.

Lesbian women, therefore, are fighting for control over all our lives, in order to have sexual choices. We are not fighting for:

- 1) civil liberties only, e.g. equality with men or straight women, because what they have isn't good enough and they themselves are fighting for more.
- 2) a little world of our own (the lesbian ghetto) where we are isolated not only from men and straight women but also from the mass of lesbian women, who are trapped in relationships with men by the same powerlessness that traps others of us in slums, female job ghettos, and childlessness.

And we are refusing to wait for the Left to construct its new world before we put ourselves and our own needs on the agenda. A society not based on our interests is based on someone else's interest in exploiting us.

We are part of an autonomous movement of women (the International Wages for Housework Campaign) whose fight for the recognition of all our capitalist work is the fight for the power to refuse the discipline of that work, especially the discipline of homosexuality. This struggle to build our power always means lesbian autonomy from those who have more power than us, including straight women, but above all from men, even gay men.

We have heard from the Left, as well as the gay movement, about making common cause with the men, for "human liberation". But the obstacle to human liberation is precisely the power that the men have over us. The common cause of homosexuality, like the Left's call to the Black movement "Black and white unite and fight", ignores the divisions between us and is an obstacle to overcoming those divisions.

The power differential between men and women that we experience everywhere in our society we also experience in the gay movement. Through our struggle we have gained a measure of independence from men, along with the possibility of living with other women. We don't want to forfeit that independence within the gay movement. We know that gay men think it's hard for them to "come out" on the job, but lesbian women have a hard time finding and keeping the lowest paid jobs even when we stay in the closet.* And gay men who are in a crisis have men friends to turn to, which means more access to money, job possibilities, professional advice, etc., than lesbian women, who invariably turn to other women. It also means that many gay men choose to remain married to

women, to be weekend homosexuals, out of convenience. Because their wages are higher they can afford to keep a house-slave on whom they depend for their daily reproduction. We stay in the closet - we are those house-slaves - because we cannot afford to leave. Leaving a marriage, for us, usually means leaving behind our children or the possibility of having children. For us lesbian women, wages for housework means wages against heterosexuality and for lesbianism, against the power that all men have over us, both straight and gay.

We cannot say it enough: although men are also exploited by capitalism, they are the instruments of capital against us. Men will dominate us unless we are strong. They will use us as long as we are weak. We will be weak as long as we are not an autonomous force in both the women's and the gay movements. Only to the degree that we develop our own power will we be able to set the terms of the support that the men give us. When we aren't autonomous of men, we fail to undermine their power over us. When we are autonomous of men, we demonstrate how, in support of our fight for power, they gain power over capital.

We urge the gay movement to take a clear stand for lesbian autonomy. Unless we lesbian women can build our power we will always risk gay men building their power at our expense. Our fight is to end the system which commands our work by keeping us weak and penniless, and which deforms our sexuality and our relationships with one another. Lesbian autonomy is a power in that struggle. And it is a power to all those, lesbian or straight, female or male, who are struggling against their own exploitation at the hands of the same system. □

*"...the difference between men's and women's wages is increasing. In 1971 the average man earned 44% more than the average woman. By 1973 it was 45.1% more. In Ontario in 1974, women waged workers earned \$1 billion less than if they were men.

2/3 of all women below the age of 25 have annual incomes of less than \$5000. Almost 50% of mother-led families had an income of less than \$4,000. 23% of single father-led families had less than \$4,000. A male head of family has a 9.3% chance of living below the poverty line. A female head of family has a 40.1% chance."

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Kingston

Conference urges Lesbian autonomy

The Queen's Homophile Association of Kingston sponsored a conference May 22-24 called "The Not-So-Invisible Woman: Lesbian Perspectives in the Gay Movement." Fifty men and forty-five women from Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia attended.

Prior to the conference, Wages Due Lesbians circulated a paper on the imperative need for lesbian autonomy in the gay movement. The paper outlined their reasons for not sending an official delegation to Kingston (see Dykes, this issue). This paper and a letter from Toronto's Gay Alliance Toward Equality outlining its reasons for not sending an official delegation were the only conference documents.

Conference planners had assumed that the way to decide the relationship of women to the gay movement was to have both women and men put forward their ideas on a lesbian perspective. But the conference chose another direction.

On Saturday morning in the first plenary session, Marie Robertson, a member of Wages Due Lesbians, moved that the women meet alone to decide the content of the agenda and the direction that women wanted the conference to take. She pointed out that the first question facing lesbian women was their autonomy in the gay movement, and noted that "the power relation between men and women - the power that men have over us because they are in a world where men have money - and women don't - doesn't disappear when the men are sleeping with each other."

"The power of a movement for gay liberation depends on the power we build, as lesbian women, against the power that men straight and gay have over us. The question we're here to sort out, the men can't help us with."

Reconvening without the men, the women's conference began with a discussion on autonomy and the conflict of interests in the gay movement between women and men. Participants noted that men may be fighting for things that won't improve the lot of women at all. As Marie Robertson of Ottawa put it: "When 'sexual orientation' is put in the Human Rights Code I'll still be a woman with no time and no money."

Some women from smaller centres expressed the fear that autonomy would mean either remaining in mixed organizations with no connection to the "autonomous women" or leaving those organizations and thereby leaving the facilities that are necessary for organizing. Others countered that if women within a mixed organization formed an

autonomous lesbian group within that organization they would have a stronger voice in demanding that those resources be always at their disposal. It was apparent that changing from the gay movement to a lesbian movement meant something that many women had not experienced before: organizing with other women to build lesbian power.

A discussion on Wages Due organizing developed into a deeper exploration on the Wages for Housework perspective and why lesbian women are fighting in the campaign. The wage, it was pointed out, would allow any woman to leave a marriage if she wants to, would allow lesbians to have children if they want to, and would give all women the power to choose whether or not to be lesbian. Wages Due members argued that participation in the Wages for Housework campaign is a lesbian strategy because it breaks their isolation and increases their power as lesbians.

Some women began talking about past and present marriages and the kind of hold that the men had on them. Others talked about what wages for housework would mean to them. Still others began demanding the right to be paid for what they want to do, to speak about sexuality at women's conferences, to run women's

clubs, and everything else that they could do when they refused unpaid housework.

The women met with the men at the end of the conference to report on their discussion. Their report was made in the form of a written statement:

"We have decided that there exists a need for an autonomous lesbian movement in Canada to fulfill our needs, and thus have formed an informal coalition. Our fight for an autonomous organization of lesbians began at the conference on Saturday morning when we women took the weekend into our own hands. We made this conference our own. However, because of the fact that a number of lesbians are isolated in small communities and feel the need for support from mixed gay movements, this autonomy in some cases will manifest itself as an independent lesbian voice from within those movements:

We realize the need to build our power as lesbian women so that we need no longer subordinate our interests to those of the straight women or the men - straight or gay - and so that our lesbian sisters who are in the majority of cases still invisible to us will have the possibility of coming out.

With the awareness that many lesbians did not attend this conference for various personal and political reasons, we have postponed the formalization of strategy proposals until we have a larger more representative voice. To this end two lesbian conferences will be held. Wages Due Lesbians Toronto will sponsor one this summer on

Lesbians and Wages for Housework, and one will take place in Ottawa next fall.

We welcome support from gay men who endorse our stand and believe that the efforts of our autonomous movement will be a positive move in strengthening the fight against oppression."

Women came away from the Kingston conference with a new sense of power and direction. They felt they could now go back to their mixed gay groups and form autonomous lesbian groups whose function would be to organize women to attend the two conferences planned for the future.

by Boo Watson