

Waging war

"Wages for Housework recognises that doing cleaning, raising children, taking care of men, is not women's biological destiny. Lesbianism recognises that heterosexual love and marriage is not women's biological destiny. Both are definitions of women's roles by the state and for the advantage of the state."

"Wages for Housework says that to fight against our roles is to fight against our work is to fight against the state."

And there in a nutshell you have the starting point for Wages Due Lesbians—a relatively new movement which is attracting much attention from gay women in all parts of the world.

The opening passage was taken from a Wages Due Lesbians pamphlet published in Toronto. Ellen Agger from Toronto Wages Due, and Ruth Hall from the London branch of the campaign, told Gay News something about the birth of their own groups and the sort of work they are tackling.

•Ellen: "It all started with a discussion group—a group of lesbians looking for ways in which we could best fight for what we needed. There was contact with Wages for Housework and we began to see the importance of that campaign, so the discussion group really evolved into Wages Due Lesbians.

"We were fighting for wages for housework, but aware all the time of particular interests as lesbians."

One of those particular interests—perhaps the most fundamental, suggested Ellen—was the question of coming out as gay. And she explained the special pressures that gay women face in trying to come out.

"It's all connected with money. So many lesbians have to take, and stay with, a man because they need money, and so they tend to stay closetted in heterosexual marriages.

"Money is fundamental to marriage. The man gets a housekeeper and the woman gets access to his wages. The 'natural, normal' woman has to love hubby, do his washing, look after his children. The name 'Wages for Housework' points out that this is a job; this work."

Ruth said that the London Wages Due group grew out of the Wages for Housework campaign, and broadened and deepened that campaign.

"There was nervousness at first in Wages for Housework when we started discussing the idea of lesbians organising as a distinct group within the campaign. A number of heterosexual women remembered the Women's Lib line that you had to be

lesbian to really fight, and they were frightened that the same thing would happen in Wages for Housework.

"But that's not our line at all. Our position is that you live your own life and fight according to the ways that suit you best."

Rapid spread

Both women found the rapid spread of the Wages campaign extremely encouraging; not only geographically—and there are now branches in the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and several European countries including Italy and the United Kingdom—but also in the range of activities.

Wages Due are setting up music and theatre groups in England (and they're still short of people, says Ruth, so if you're interested . . .). Lesbians from Wages Due have appeared on television recently, both in Canada and England. Wages for Housework campaign has just completed a round of public meetings in Bristol, Cambridge and London—three cities where they have established groups. And as this issue of Gay News was going to press, Wages Due Lesbians were coming to the end of a three day international conference in Toronto entitled 'Towards a strategy for the lesbian movement'. Items on the agenda included sexuality, living as lesbians, custody of children, and government cut-backs on public spending.

Cut-backs figure high on the list of present campaigns. Both in London and Toronto lesbians are to the fore in battles over reductions in family allowances. Wages for Housework has drawn up petitions for presentation to both the Canadian and the British governments over the impoverishment of women. Wages Due Lesbians have published a detailed endorsement of the petition, and copies of their endorsement accompany every single copy of the petition that circulates publicly.

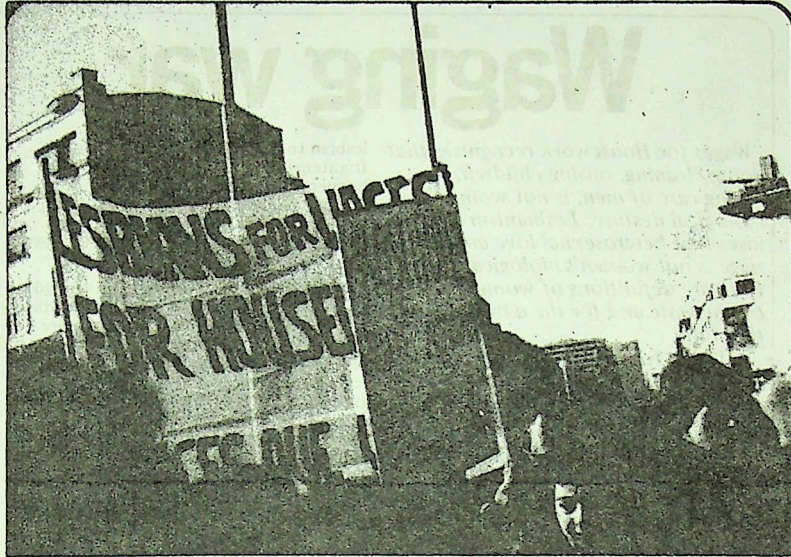
Toronto rally

Ellen told a Toronto rally against the cuts: "Lesbians all over the world have made a strong bid for the rights we need, and are denied, under this system—the right to custody of our children, to job security, an end to discrimination from landlords, schools, employers and so on. We have done this by being a visible force wherever possible.

"But for most lesbians our existence is still underground. Through these cutbacks we are being forced even further underground.

"As the crisis continues, women are being forced to depend much more on a man's wages. This means for lesbians that it's going to be harder to fight openly. All the independence we have fought for as lesbian women is under attack."

Taking the petition around collecting signatures has been an invaluable experience for many gay women. "It took us months,"



Photograph: Bob Workman (Gay News)

said Ellen, "to tell strangers that we are lesbians. But people's reactions made it easier—women understood. It was really breaking down the barriers between us and other women.

"And we also spoke more publicly at rallies. Of course, the organisers would be nervous to begin with. At one rally they formally closed the meeting and then let us speak. But the response was good and people listened to us attentively. Conversation afterwards was positive, and wise-cracking men in the audience who had tried to make jokes about it got firmly slapped down."

The London petition was launched on

The Wages Due Lesbians endorsement, says Ruth, is being carried with the petition into homes, factories and offices across the country.

"You see, the whole wages campaign is for all women—whether they go out to work or work in the house, whether or not they're married, whether they have children or not. And remember you don't always get away from men just because you're a lesbian.

"We've managed to get away from the sexual work, but not the rest. We're still very much trapped by the housework—gay men sometimes find that too.

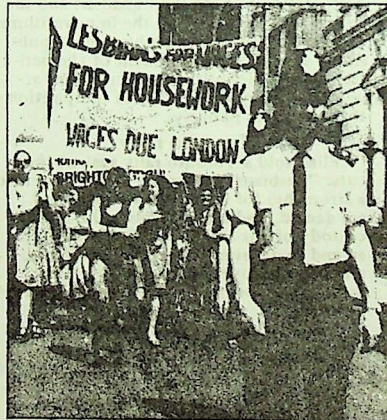
"If we were actually paid wages for the work we do, it would help so many lesbians to come out and live as lesbians. They wouldn't have to pretend to be heterosexual in order to hang on to a man's wages packet."

Again it all came down to money, she said.

"By getting out of the sexual work we're effectively challenging the discipline of what we're allowed to do sexually. But there are still other constraints—having enough time, having a place of your own. You need money if you're going to solve them. Lesbians are challenging the whole basis of traditional women's work by challenging the family."

Ruth and Ellen left us with a thought to ponder—a verse from the Wages Due Song written by two Canadian sisters:

*"Well if women were paid for all we do
I'll tell you one thing that's true as true—
We wouldn't be free, but I'm telling you
There'd be a lot of wages due!"*



Photograph: John McKinnon

May Day. "With every price rise," it points out, "Family Allowance is whittled down. And they don't even call it a freeze." Only a few weeks later the Labour government shelved its child benefit scheme, which has only strengthened the determination of the Wages campaign.

UK contacts for WFH (Wages for Housework) and WDL (Wages Due Lesbians):

LONDON: WDL/WFH, Women's Centre, 129 Drummond Street, London NW1 (Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday afternoons; or evenings by arrangement) phone 01-387 3550 (copies of the petition available from this address). WDL: Phone Anne on 01-961 3709.

BRISTOL: WFH, 79 Richmond Road, Bristol 6, phone Suzie on 0272 422116.

CAMBRIDGE: WFH, 19 City Road, Cambridge, phone Paola on 0223 57142.