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## Conference explores lesbian autonomy

Eighty Canadian, American, and English women - black, white, lesbian and straight - gathered July 24 in Toronto for a conference on lesbians and the Wages for Housework Campaign sponsored by Toronto Wages Due Lesbians. They were seeking concrete direction on how to build their power as lesbians.

The first session, on autonomy, began with an international panel which included Ruth Hall of Wages Due Lesbians, England, Wilmette Brown of Safire and Black Women for Wages for Housework of New York, and Francie Wyland of Toronto Wages Due Lesbians. The three women elaborated on the fight for the independence lesbians need in their daily lives and the implications of that fight in their organizing with other women.

Hall explored the power over lesbians which is conferred on straight women by their legitimacy and their access to a man's (higher) wage. This power will continue to divide women, she said, as long as accusations of lesbianism are used to keep all women in line.

Brown described the three levels of autonomy needed by black women. First, autonomy is needed from black men because "we could not and cannot now count on them to defend or articulate our interests as women." Second, autonomy is needed from white women because, although all women do the same work, black women have less access to education, training and decent-paying jobs. Also, because black men are often unemployed, black women are forced outside the home to accept the lowest-paying jobs or into prostitution to gain access to a white man's wage.

Third, autonomy is needed from black straight women. Because of society's definition of black women as breeders, whores, and the most 'sexual' of women, a black lesbian is a super-freak.

Wyland described the lesbian movement as millions of mostly closeted women fighting for the possibility of sleeping with the people closest to them: other women, fighting against sexual servitude to men and against the penalties for refusing that sexual work. She explained that the economic crisis - cutbacks, wage-freezes, price hikes - is an attack on the independence from men

that women, including lesbians, have fought for. She stressed that the crisis made the building of the power of lesbians an urgent task.

The three presentations clarified the significance of lesbian autonomy. Women who previously have had no common ground can end their isolation and join forces on the basis of their common need for the time, money and choices they have so far been denied. The Wages for Housework Campaign can unite lesbians with other women without ignoring differences, because black and lesbian women have their own autonomous organizations within the Campaign to put forward their specific needs.

In the final general meeting, Wages Due Lesbians detailed their work in organizing in the Family Allowance Protest and the Wages for Housework Campaign. Brown and Wyland said it was fallacious to separate the fight for wages for housework from other struggles. In the Wages for Housework Campaign, they said, it is possible to point out in every struggle what is at stake for women, black women, and lesbians.

Wyland noted that because women raise children, the threat of losing them is a powerful weapon which the state uses to keep women in line. Any woman who fights against dependence on men is regarded as 'unfit'. Lesbians face very bleak prospects in a custody battle. She emphasized that most cases never go to court. "We have to give up the kids," she said, "because only men have the money to support them and they are winning custody more often."

Wyland is writing a pamphlet on child custody and spoke on this subject as a member of Wages Due Lesbians on Global Television news shortly after the conference.

At a short summation session, a resolution was unanimously adopted which stated that all women were entitled to wages for the housework they do and that lesbians are kept in the closet by the lack of this wage. A second resolution, also passed unanimously, stated: "No lesbian or any other woman should face the blackmail of losing custody of her children in court through social pressure or through poverty. We demand from the government the money we need to keep our children without being forced to depend on a man."

by Heather Stirling □



Black Women For Wages For Housework, from New York, at the Wages Due Lesbians' Conference

photo: A. Outgley