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BOLTON

On the weekend of May 23-24 a feminist conference was held in Bolton, Ontario. It was attended by 100 women, including 25 from outside Toronto who came from St. Catherines, Ottawa, Stratford, Thunder Bay, and Winnipeg. A group of us from Wages Due Lesbians (Toronto) went for one day to contribute how we have been organizing in the Wages for Housework campaign.

The organizers planned the conference as a retreat in the country "in the spirit of consciousness raising" for the purpose of discussing "the direction of the women's movement". But they saw their role as only providing the occasion for individual women to meet and discuss, rather than to propose an organized agenda to help the conference grapple with the thorny questions of feminist strategy confronting us all.

As a result the conference was "structureless". Or was it? The organizers kept putting us in "small groups", supposedly to facilitate discussion, but in effect splitting us off from one another. Many felt that this separated and contained what happened in each group. More than a conference, it was a set of disconnected workshops. No overall direction was able to emerge to orient discussion on strategy, and what any one had to say remained very isolated. Ironically, it was to overcome our isolation that we formed the women's movement to begin with!

At one point on Saturday afternoon, the chair of the "plenary" session was presented with a long list of possibilities for workshops, but refused to give any direction about how to proceed. Women just began drifting off in this or that direction at random. The organizers seemed satisfied with this sort of event, but many women were there, having travelled a good distance, to confront strategic questions on how to organize for power at a time when we are feeling the effects of the "crisis" and the recent deluge of cutbacks.

Fortunately, many women gravitated to one large workshop on Saturday afternoon and a discussion on strategies for the women's movement got going. Many spoke of how the movement has been floundering with an increasingly impoverished social service network, a smattering of women's communes, and a coffeehouse here and there. Wages Due Lesbians spoke about the necessity to protect and extend the power that has allowed many of us to come out and refuse dependence on men as a condition for survival. We described how the Wages for Housework Campaign has put us in touch with hundreds of lesbian women, many of whom are mothers, that are fighting alongside straight women to win recognition of all the unpaid work that has kept us weak, divided, and dependent.

Opposing views of strategy began to really emerge. Many wanted a movement to build "alternate feminist institutions" and saw women's fight as being against our repressed natures to overcome heterosexuality and love other women. Those of us who had been speaking about the Campaign put forward the strategic necessity of attacking our powerlessness at its root: unpaid housework--in order to gain any control over our sexuality whether we are lesbian or straight. At points the discussion was very heated, but avoiding political clarification on how to build power is suicidal for any movement.

The discussion on "the Institution of Heterosexuality" began with the lesbian separatists challenging other women to justify heterosexuality politically. A number of us from Wages Due responded by saying that attacking heterosexuality is not a matter of attacking women sleeping with men because heterosexuality is a relation of power that men have over women because they can command our unpaid labour whether we are straight or lesbian. That power relation is so pervasive in our lives that even when we stop sleeping with individual men, we are still expected to be servants to men on the job, on the streets, in school, etc. In other words, heterosexuality is a way of extracting unpaid and low paid servitude from women. How essential that servitude is becomes clear when a woman says she's a lesbian--she pays the price of losing her children, her "respectability", jobs, housing, and the security of a man's wage. All the noise about lesbians being sick and per-

verted is nothing but blackmail to keep our noses to the grindstone.

The separatist women then argued that all women should give up "male privilege" in favor of forming women's communities to take care of all our needs. At this point the divisions became quite deep because for many of us this is a formula for the worst kind of isolation--not only from straight women who are also fighting against male domination, but from the mass of lesbian women who can't afford to abandon all and come out. Not surprisingly, most of the straight women had left the room by now. Wages Due Lesbians continued by saying that our strategy must be building the power to give every woman the choice of being a lesbian. That means recognizing that many women are "straight" because they can't afford not to be. Putting a guilt trip on them is the surest way to deepen divisions among women and perpetrate our lack of choice. We emphasized that the reason more women don't come out is not "low consciousness" but a low level of power. What we are organizing for in the Campaign is to build our power as women to such a point that all women have the choice of saying yes or no to being a lesbian without losing a thing either way. Overthrowing heterosexuality doesn't mean just "boycotting" men but abolishing the power they have over us because we are wageless--even when we are lesbian.

A number of women spoke to the fact that all women's communes and communities can offer is an escape, a little haven away from the world to come home to after being exploited all day. But what about the rest of the day? Some of us would like to be free 24 hours a day! Experience has shown all too clearly that no commune is going to be "uncorrupted" by the society around it. The lifestyles open to most of us are so determined by our poverty as lesbians and as women that a commune can never be all we aim for. We will fight for and gain some along the way but we want much more.

By the end of the Saturday sessions the lines had been drawn quite sharply. Not accidentally, the conference organizers were themselves split between lesbian and straight, each of them congregating in their own workshops and keeping pretty much to themselves. Wages Due feels strongly that these divisions are the result of our powerlessness as women and must be confronted with a strategy which will overcome them. Judging from the sessions we attended, many women came to Bolton looking precisely for that. The upcoming conference on 'Lesbians and the Wages for Housework Campaign' will continue the debate on how to build lesbian power.

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