Articles from Workers Power and Permanent Revolution

Socialism and the fight for women's liberation

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From Workers Power 114, February 1989

Women for socialism

Working class women face a barrage of attacks from the Tories and the bosses. Cuts in social services, an increase in part-time over full-time work, the imposition of the Poll Tax, insufficient childcare provision—all this increases the burden on women.

At the same time, the possibility of organising to fight these attacks exists. Working class women formed the backbone of anti-Poll Tax unions on many Scottish estates. Women are an increasing percentage of trade union members. Nurses and textile workers are just two of the groups of women workers involved in industrial action last year.

But while this potential exists, organisations of socialist women have declined. Although women are still fighting for their rights in the Labour Party, overall participation has fallen. There has been no conference of socialist feminists for a decade. The women's movement has fragmented. *Outwrite*, the anti-imperialist women's paper shut down at the end of 1988.

Will the "Women for Socialism" Conference in London on 25-26 February provide a chance to reverse this trend and build a leadership to organise a fightback amongst working class women? This looks unlikely. The "Women for Socialism" advertising leaflet says the organisers:

"... aim to form a policy-developing and non-bureaucratic bridge between established political parties and the feminist movement".

This sounds like a perspective of writing a policy document for the Labour Party which will be promptly binned by the Kinnockite leadership!

We do need to revive the fight for women's rights and women's liberation. But what we don't need is to revive the disastrous "socialist feminist" tradition. In the miners' strike when thousands of working class women were mobilised and organised, the socialist feminists argued for networks, links with other campaigns and building Labour Party Women's Sections. That was totally inadequate. Links are useful when they are based on building joint action in defence of women's interests. They are time wasting and demoralising if all they do is pool frustration and write alternative policy documents which no one acts upon.

Socialist feminism has been seen in practice in local government women's committees. From promoting equal opportunities policies with no resources to carry them out, many were turned into agents of the councils in carrying out cuts. The "Women for Socialism" Conference should assess the lessons of these experiences. Workers Power will be arguing that women workers need a fighting movement around a revolutionary action programme.

From Workers Power 114, February 1989

Marxism or feminism?

Marxists are consistent fighters for women's liberation. We believe that the complete equality of women can only be achieved through the creation of a society in which the private home is no longer a prison in which women toil to maintain the family; a society in which the labour of all is directed towards meeting the needs of all. In other words socialism is the precondition for the full liberation of women.

We do not conclude from this that the organisation of women to fight for their specific and immediate needs has to be put off until socialism has been achieved. We do not tell women class-fighters to "wait until after the revolution" for the achievement of their demands.

Battles for equal pay, better childcare, free abortion and contraceptive services should be part of the immediate struggle of the working class. They must be waged as part of a fight for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

But revolutionary Marxists are not feminists. There is a fundamental flaw with all strands of feminism which means its adherents cannot lead the struggle for women's liberation to a successful conclusion.

"Feminism" describes the theory and practice of both the modern petit bourgeois-dominated Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and their ancestors; the suffrage movements and liberal women's rights campaigns of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The unifying idea held by all feminists is that there is a separate "woman question", distinct from other questions of inequality, exploitation and oppression. Feminism necessarily rejects the idea that the woman question is, fundamentally, a class question.

For working class women, however, oppression is based on fundamental features of capitalist society. The isolated family unit is the only place where children can be raised and workers fed and maintained. It is the unit needed by capitalism to reproduce labour power. The bulk of household work is done by women, whether or not they have jobs outside the home. Where women do carry out paid work

they get lower wages, worse conditions and are still expected to treat the family and its maintenance as their main priority.

Unless the private drudgery of housework can be destroyed through the provision of collective childcare, laundries, eating places and the like, women will remain unable to fully participate in work, political and social life outside the home. And this socialisation of housework cannot be achieved under capitalism. It challenges the most fundamental social, economic and ideological features of society.

Any strategy for women's liberation which would solve these fundamental questions for the working class women must include the struggle against capitalism itself.

Feminists of the modern WLM offer a strategy for liberation that is not based on united proletarian class struggle. The radical feminist wing of the WLM set the agenda in the 1970s with their argument that women's oppression transcended particular class societies and flowed from the exploitation and oppression of all women by all men. Women exist as a distinct caste or class for the radical feminists. Men are the enemy and the fight for liberation has to be directed against them. Class differences amongst men are ignored.

For radical feminists this system of oppression, patriarchy, is based upon the power of men within the family and the state.

The violence of men against women plus the threat of such violence, is the method by which men keep women enslaved. Thus the principal targets of the radical feminists are the supposed symbols of male power—pornography and cultural sexism. By ruling out any united struggle with male workers against the bosses they offer no way forward for working class women at all. Their strategy of separatism condemns them to the periphery of the real liberation struggles that involve women all over the world.

In reaction to this many WLM activists who regarded themselves as socialists and feminists tried to fuse the theory of patriarchy with various forms of socialism. "Socialist feminism" shared with the radicals the view that Marxism had not provided an explanation of women's oppression. So, while socialism was alright to explain class society, feminism was necessary to deal with sexual oppression.

Socialist feminism correctly identified the existence of women's oppression before capitalism. But they ignored the fact that pre-capitalist societies were class societies too. They dismissed the work of the early Marxists, in particular Engels, because they were based on outdated 19th century research. In fact despite new discoveries about the history of pre-capitalist societies Engels' basic idea remains valid. Women's oppression originates with the emergence of private property.

This was never just a theoretical mistake. The socialist feminists never seriously tried to mobilise working class women around working class demands. Such mobilisations always pose the question of unity with working class men. But socialist feminism favoured an "autonomous women's movement"; namely one free from the political influence of the "male dominated left" and separated from the equally "male dominated" labour movement.

Against this Marxists fight for women's caucuses in the workers' organisations and for a proletarian women's movement linked politically and organisationally to the workers' movement.

With the crisis of the WLM in the late 1970s many socialist feminists took refuge in the reformist labour movement. However they concentrated on winning the Labour Party and unions to better policies for women within capitalism.

In particular many of these activists found their way into local government women's committees and equal opportunities campaigns inside the unions.

But in the face of the Tories' relentless attacks on local government, the unions and the working class these powerless organisations were unable to lift a finger in defence of working class women's interests, let alone fight for women's liberation.

Socialist feminism, like radical feminism, has nothing to offer the masses of working class women. Both have failed the test of the class struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. Marxism, not feminism, provides the way forward.

From Workers Power 108, August 1988

Equal pay and the courts

Recent court decisions on equal pay seem to offer hope for thousands of women. But the bosses are preparing to fight every inch of the way and women workers will have to rely on their own strength to win higher pay.

Women workers are 45% of the workforce. They work 36% of the hours worked. They receive 28% of employment income. These calculations from the GMB show just how far women are from receiving equal pay. It is now 18 years since the Equal Pay Act was passed, yet women's earnings remain only 66% of men's.

Two recent rulings in the House of Lords have strengthened the legal rights of women through closing some of the loopholes which allowed employers to refuse equal pay claims. In May, Julie Hayward, an assistant cook at Cammell Laird's, finally won her claim for equal pay with male joiners, painters and engineers, worth £30 per week. She began her claim four and a half years previously as one of the first test cases of an amendment to the Equal Pay Act which the government passed in 1983 in line with a directive from the European Court of Justice. This amend-

ment allowed for equal pay for work of equal value, not just identical jobs. Hayward's case was based on the argument that her work was of equal value to the men in other jobs with similar skills and responsibilities.

She had to take her case through the Industrial Tribunal, the Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT), the Court of Appeal and finally to the House of Lords before she won it. Cammell Laird's, recognising their responsibility to fight the case on behalf of the bosses, fought every inch of the way.

The second legal victory was in June, when five women from Freeman's Mail Order company successfullly appealed to the House of Lords in their claim for equal pay. They had previously been ruled against by an industrial tribunal and EAT on the basis that since there was a man on their grade, they couldn't claim equal pay with any other section of workers. This was a very important loophole for the bosses who have been employing "token" men to work the same grades as a mainly female workforce in order to get round the EPA.

Rene Pickstone and the other warehouse operatives who brought the case will get an extra £4.22 per week up to £81.88, but this test case could herald many other claims. Freeman's boss Mr Evelyn Cribb complained:

"It's a pity that the House of Lords have come to this decision as it will have unfortunate consequences for employers in general".

The miserly barons of the CBI reacted to the Law Lord's ruling by warning that this could result in "substantial disruption to pay structures" and prove damaging to "competitiveness and job opportunities". Now they have gone running to Employment Secretary, Norman Fowler, asking for an amendment to the law, so they can avoid paying more to women workers.

The two test cases have taken years to be settled, despite the clear nature of the EC directives on equal pay. And whilst these decisions were awaited, hundreds of other cases have been held up at the industrial tribunal stage. Similar cases at Alvis, Dunlop, GEC, Massey Ferguson, Rolls Royce and others have been waiting for the Freeman verdict. But there could still be lengthy delays—average waiting times for tribunal decisions are running at 18 months. In the meantime industry bosses have the government's ear.

Unfortunately the overall impact of legislation on women's pay has been very limited. Whilst some groups of women have won substantial rises, women's pay continues to fall well behind that of men. In 1975 when the 1970 Equal Pay Act was enacted (the bosses had been given five years to work out ways round it), women manual workers had average weekly earnings of 56% of men's. For non-manual workers the figure was 58%. The latest figures for 1988 show those figures to be 62% for manual and 59% for non-manual, indicating little general improvement in the relative position of women. One of the reasons for women having lower earnings is that they tend to work fewer hours—many are part-timers and few women do overtime. But even taking such factors into account, by looking at the hourly pay of women, it has fallen relative to men's since a peak in 1978. At that point women's hourly earnings were 75.5% of men's. In 1987 it had fallen to 73.6%.

The major reason why legislation has failed to improve women's pay is that women remain in highly segregated jobs and have increasingly become part of the flexible, part-time or temporary sector of the workforce who have few rights at work and are frequently badly organised and thus with little bargaining power. In the health service sector 80% of employees are women, in footwear and clothing 73%. In these sectors pay is low and women are concentrated in the lowest grades. Almost half of women workers are part-time, some due to domestic responsibilities, but increasingly because they cannot get full time jobs. The bosses prefer part timers since they have few rights (holiday pay, sickness benefits and employment protection) and are easy to sack if they start demanding higher pay or better conditions.

Women's concentration in such sections of the workforce is not accidental. It is because of the role of women in the home where they are responsible for the family welfare and raising of children. When women also work for wages outside the home, as they are increasingly doing, their domestic responsibilities put certain limitations either on the jobs they are able to do (they often have to fit in with child-care arrangements, have breaks in order to have children etc) or the jobs that the bosses recognise as suitable for women. These restrictions have also affected women workers' ability to organise to fight for higher wages, especially as the trade union movement has historically failed to respond to women workers' particular circumstances, and failed to organise them effectively. It is these factors, stemming from women's position in society, that lead to the gross inequalities in pay, not simply bosses paying women lower wages for the same job. In addition the new ruling that allows equal pay for work of equal value raises many questions about what skills are valued. The skills of a qualified nurse, or a shorthand typist have traditionally been undervalued, compared to jobs which men do which may in fact involve similar training time, dexterity and responsibility.

Legislation will not eradicate these fundamental inequalities between men and women workers under capitalism. But that does not mean we should ignore the laws. The recent rulings should be used as an incentive by women to claim equal pay with men doing work of equal value in their industry. But relying on tribunals and the courts will not convince the bosses to quickly and substantially alter pay rates. Their reactions to the Law Lords shows the kind of opposition women can expect. The only effective way for women to press their equal pay claims is through organisation and industrial action. Famous equal pay struggles such as at Trico show that when women take such action they can force the bosses to pay up.

The problem of recent years has been that the unions have not given a lead to women over pay. Equal pay is only one aspect of the low pay which women generally face. But rather than a campaign to unionise women workers, to demand big pay increases and back them up with industrial action, the unions have sat back and relied on legal test

cases, industrial tribunals and generally trying to persuade the bosses to agree. The result of this strategy is seen in the very low levels of women's pay. In 1987 31% of women earned a gross weekly wage of less than £110.

It is no accident that when women had their highest hourly pay relative to men in 1978, it followed a period when women themselves waged militant fights over low pay, equal pay and unionisation, at Trico, SFIs, Grunwicks, Hoovers and many others. But women workers frequently found themselves up against the opposition of the union leaders who were fearful of women's militant action getting out of hand. Even where women had the union leadership's grudging support, they had to rely on their own strength. The Ford sewing machinists, who started off the whole movement for equal pay with their strike in 1968, had to wait 17 years before they finally won—and that only after failing to win through the tribunal system and taking strike action themselves. Nowadays the union leaderships are more welcoming to women, but just as hostile to militant action.

The only real answer to women's low and unequal pay is organisation and a fight with the bosses. The courts and laws may grant some formal rights but there will be new loopholes found, different ways to deny women their demands. The bosses' organisations like the CBI, backed by the government (and the courts when necessary) will obstruct moves to dramatically increase women's earnings, since it would threaten their profits. So women workers often need the strength of industrial action to "persuade" the bosses even to comply with the law. It is not only male workers who have industrial muscle. Women textile workers, manufacturing workers, health workers have all shown that strikes can be effective.

In the fight for equal pay the first task is to build strong organisations of women in the workplace. All women workers, including part timers and temporary workers, should be recruited to the relevant union. Workplace meetings should be held to elect stewards and keep everyone involved in the activity of the union. Glossy newsletters from head offices plus cheap shopping deals which many unions are now pushing are no substitute for workplace organisation. Claims for equal pay should be put to tribunals, where relevant, but the workers themselves should decide what constitutes work of equal value. Presently there are bogus management job evaluation schemes which decide who is valued equal to whom. Committees of workers in each industry should make their own assessment and press their claims directly on the bosses backed by industrial action. Women and men should join together in such initiatives in order to overcome the dangerous divisions which can arise from equal pay disputes. Male workers will benefit if women win better wages, and their own strength is increased by improving the organisation of the unions and the shop-floor workers.

Through women and men workers taking control over such issues they can begin to challenge the very power of the bosses within the workplace. By imposing workers' control the potential strength and ability of workers to organise production and society in general will be seen.

The poverty that so many women live in under Thatcher's "booming" Britain shows the urgency of these tasks. Four and a half years waiting for the courts to settle a dispute is hopeless. Women must organise now to fight for better pay, for control over their conditions of work and ultimately for the abolition of capitalism which forces women to live as second class citizens at home, at work and in society.

From Workers Power 113, January 1989

Women in Bhutto's Pakistan

The success of Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in the recent elections has raised hopes of change for thousands of Pakistani women. Under the reactionary regime of Zia-ul-Haq, women's democratic rights were severely curtailed. Harsh Islamic laws deepened centuries old oppression. The Zia regime reversed the trend of "modernisation" which had led to an extension of women's democratic rights.

Under Zia, the Islamicisation of the Penal Code included the notorious Zena Ordinance by which all sexual relations outside marriage brought penalties of flogging or death. Women's testimony was held of less account than men's.

The impact of the measures was to strengthen patriarchial relations within the family and countryside. The system of *purdah* (the segregation and seclusion of women) had official approval. Women in the cities who had won a measure of freedom in social relations found themselves targets of Islamicisation and under pressure to return to the *chador* (the veil which covers the head and body). In the early 1980s the *chador* was made compulsory for women in the civil service and later in education establishments. This had particularly severe effects on women from the middle class and intelligentsia who had most benefits from earlier modernisation programmes.

The triumph of Benazir Bhutto shows that Zia and the religious hierarchy did not succeed in permanently excluding all women from public life. But Bhutto's accession brings no guarantees of improvement for the vast majority of Pakistani women who do not share her privileges.

Bhutto's dynasty is part of the modernising wing of Pakistan's ruling elite. Women from this section of society have for decades been allowed greater freedom and educational opportunities than lower middle class, working class and peasant women. The nationalist movement against the British occupation aimed to industrialise and modernise.

This demanded an educated ruling group for administration and business. In turn this meant that women, particularly those of the upper class, were needed as a force for progress. Besides this, the democratic ideals of equality and justice with which the nationalist leaders mobilised the population against the British occupation, also lent support to women's independence.

Nevertheless progress for women was slow in the new Pakistan. Women did not win full suffrage until 1956. Equal rights for men and women were not enshrined in the Constitution until 1973 during the early years of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's premiership. That period saw an increase in women's participation in public and social life. The military regime of General Zia which succeeded it, halted those minimal advances.

Benazir Bhutto and the PPP have therefore been able to relate to a modernising and egalitarian tradition, including the liberalisation of laws on women.

But whilst upper class women and those of the intelligentsia benefited from the previous PPP reforms, and may again if Benazir Bhutto carries out some of her promises, the mass of Pakistani women remained unaffected. The PPP has remained a bourgeois and landlordist party. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto left the power and wealth of the big landlords undisturbed.

For millions of Pakistani women this meant no relief from their intense oppression and exploitation on the land. Three quarters of Pakistan's population lives on the land. Most women's existence is dominated by the daily grind of survival. Many villages have no running water or electricity. Women and girls are responsible for all aspects of domestic work and welfare, spending long hours in back breaking labour such as water carrying, food transportation, repairs and maintenance of the home. It is little wonder that, faced with these enormous tasks, few rural Pakistani girls are allowed to spend much time at school.

The literacy rate for women in Pakistan reaches just 15%. Men's literacy is five times higher. The combination of poor nutrition—the best food is frequently reserved for the men and boys—with successive pregnancies, leads to chronic anaemia and generally poor health.

In addition to this household labour, many Pakistani women also work on the land. It has been estimated that 70 to 80% of rural women are involved in some agricultural work, but this is not translated into any form of economic independence. The labour of all family members generally belongs to the tenant who leases the land. Over half of the country's land is leased out in some form of tenancy, and women are excluded from being tenants. Therefore the labour women perform "belongs" to the male head of household. This is also often the case when women are hired as agricultural wage labourers rather than as tenants—again the income goes to the husband. Where land is owned by small peasant families women are once again excluded—a legacy of British colonial rule which prevented women inheriting land. Whilst the laws have now changed, the custom remains and few women own land.

The impact of imperialist exploitation on the position of women in Pakistan is profoundly contradictory. On the land the two major export crops, rice and cotton, do involve the employment of many women as "independent" wage labourers, receiving a wage directly, leading to potentially more economic independence for women. But whilst the family remains so intensely patriarchal and dominated by Islamic codes this will mean little for women as they give their wages to the household head.

The conversion to such crops for export has also driven millions of peasants from the land. They have been concentrated in urban areas in vast shanty towns where women struggle to keep their families and households together. Work as domestic servants or factory hands is available for some women in conditions of super-exploitation, physically destructive in intensity with long hours and pitiful wages. Imperialist domination of the economy of Pakistan has led to these conditions for women—super-exploitation as supposedly "free" wage labourers whilst they have no independence within the family and restricted rights in law.

It was the development of capitalism which led to pressures for "modernisation" with regard to women under Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. But lifting the veil for ruling class women did not destroy the customs which imprison the masses of women. Zia brought in a particularly repressive interpretation of Islamic law and enshrined it in the state legislation. He did this with the support of the imperialists who, despite hostility to Islam when paraded by an oppositional regime such as Iran, are prepared to overlook questions of bourgeois democracy and women's rights when they have a loyal ally who suppresses the workers and supports the anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan.

A fight against the oppression of women in Pakistan must involve both a struggle against religious and cultural reaction and against the rule of the landlords and industrialists who benefit from women's subordination. Bhutto and the PPP cannot be trusted to do either. Some liberalisation is likely both because of the modernising project of the PPP and the pressure from its mass base. Women's organisations, notably the umbrella Women's Action Forum, have been pressing for a reversal of Zia's measures. Women in the upper middle class, expecially the professionals and civil servants, will be expecting restrictions to be lifted. But so far Bhutto has taken care not to precipitate a crisis with the military or religious hierarchies.

The Women's Action Forum, while being more radical than the older All Pakistan Women Association (APWA), has like the latter, argued its case for change within an Islamic framework. They have quoted Koranic injunctions which shows that women are accorded a much higher status within those teachings than they are by the current laws and customs of Pakistan. For instance, women's right to own property is enshrined within the Koran, but little practised. The dowry is often considered to be the daughter's "share" of the family wealth—yet it is paid to her new husband and his family!

Pointing out such hypocrisy can help reveal the real motives of the reactionaries: but to leave the matter there concedes that Pakistan's laws should be subject to religious ones—and thus to the interpreters of religion. Any

compromises on the need for a secular state will be a barrier to the emancipation of women.

But a greater barrier to the full liberation of women lies in the stranglehold of the big landlords and capitalists on Pakistan's society and economy. While they hold sway, the masses of Pakistan will continue in poverty. Women's role as unpaid drudges and a pool of cheap labour will remain. Only the road of class struggle can open the way for true emancipation. Such a class struggle must be pitted against the bourgeois government of the PPP.

The bourgeois feminists will not be prepared to take that road, although individuals will of course be won to the side of the working class. Women from these groups may well be courageous fighters for equal rights, and tireless campaigners for the welfare of women generally. But where their own privileges and wealth are dependent on the continuation of existing class rule, they will turn their backs on the mass of women.

How can working class and peasant women organise for their own interests? The burden of oppression weighs heavily and leaves them, in their isolation, prey to reactionary ideas. Nevertheless, the increasing numbers in factory work, some advances in unionisation and the history of working class and even peasant women in mobilising first against the British, and later against Zia's repression, shows the possibility.

A major task of revolutionary communists in Pakistan is to take up the cause of women's liberation, to win adherents from the existing feminist movement to the side of class struggle and to argue for the need for a proletarian women's movement with communist aims—the destruction of the power of landlordism and capitalism and the freeing of women to play their full part in social and political life.

From Workers Power 91, March 1987

When women set Russia ablaze

In February 1917 (old style calendar) women workers from the proletarian Vyborg district of Petrograd marched out of their factories demanding "Bread!". Five days later the workers and soldiers had led an insurrection which forced the Tsar to abdicate. The Petrograd women workers' celebration of International Womens' Day had unleashed the February Revolution.

International Womens' Day was first adopted as a holiday for proletarian women by the leaders of the Second International's Socialist Women's Movement. Clara Zetkin proposed to the International Womens' meeting in 1910 that a day be declared for proletarian women, similar to the May Day workers' holiday. The date eventually agreed was 8 March (new style calendar)—commemorating a day on which thousands of women workers in New York had demonstrated against appalling conditions women workers endured in the needle industry.

The holiday was taken up in Russia from 1913 onwards. Because of the old calendar in pre-revolutionary Russia the equivalent date was 23 February. In 1913 planned demonstrations were cracked down on by the police and only leaflets and papers were issued in the end. The Bolsheviks, under the instigation of Konkordiya Samoilova and Inessa Armand, produced several articles in their paper *Pravda* in the weeks before 23 February culminating in a special issue to celebrate the day itself. The articles outlined the reality of life for working women in Russia and argued the need for them to be organised alongside men in fighting organisations of the class.

The response from working women to these *Pravda* articles was so overwhelming that there was not enough room in the paper for all the letters received. This prompted Samoilova to urge the exiled Lenin and Krupskaya to produce a special paper directed at working class women. Inessa Armand, who herself had been arrested and had fled to exile, was instrumental in persuading them to agree to this idea. Krupskaya raised it on the exiled Bolshevik Central Committee which agreed to the production *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker) with the launch to be around International Womens' Day 1914.

These developments within the Bolshevik party occurred in response to a renewed wave of militant class struggle in Russia between 1912 and 1914. Women workers were an increasingly important force in the Russian working class. After the 1905 Revolution the employers deliberately recruited women in preference to men in many industries. As the bosses' own factory inspectorate noted in 1907:

"The reasons for this [recruitment of women] are as before: their greater industry, attentiveness and abstinence (they do not drink or smoke), their compliance and greater reasonableness in respect of pay."

By 1914 women made up 25.7% of the industrial workforce in Russia and were becoming increasingly militant, making all political groups take notice of them. The bourgeois feminists, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks all made special efforts to organise working women in this period.

Despite all but one woman on the Editorial Board in Russia being arrested, *Rabotnitsa* was produced for 23

February. It quickly sold out as did the other five issues which were distributed. It was widely read in the factories and groups of women organised around it, many joining the Party as a result. The outbreak of war in August halted the production of *Rabotnitsa* but the foundations laid then made future work by the Bolsheviks among women workers much easier to establish. The mobilisation of soldiers and production for the war effort led to enormous deprivation in the cities and villages of Russia. As early as April 1915 there were riots by women demanding bread, and these continued sporadically right through to 1917. The specific role of women workers in the February revolution occurred because of the very acute way the war had affected them. Between 1914 and 1917 the number of women employed in the factories increased still further because of the conscription of men to the front line. In the country as a whole the percentage of women increased from 26.6% to 43.2%. These women workers were on the whole, new to the cities and the working class.

In Petrograd itself the number of women working in factories doubled, rising by 68,000 during the war to 129,800. There were thousands of women workers concentrated in large factories—up to 10,000 women in one plant—with less than three years experience by 1917. Often their husbands, sons and brothers had been conscripted for the war. Minimal food rations were available only by queuing for up to four hours a day—sometimes even then the food ran out. Women earned about half the wages of men. They were concentrated in textiles and chemical industries where hours were long and conditions poor. They often suffered physical and sexual harassment from the bosses and their lackey foremen.

The intensity of the oppression of these women led to explosive rebellions. In general the strikes involving predominantly women workers had economic aims, whereas by late 1916 more of the strikes in the male dominated engineering and metalworking industries were for political ends. This reflected the longer tradition of organisation of the male workers, some with Bolshevik and Menshevik organisers long established within their ranks.

By February 1917 the class struggle was intensifying. But although there were many strikes in Petrograd during January and February, none of them sparked the whole city in the way the women were to do. In preparation for the Women's Day celebrations Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and the *Mezhraiontsy* group (an inter-district group of socialists committed to neither the Bolsheviks or the Mensheviks) planned propaganda and educational meetings for the day. In the Vyborg district on 20 February some workers called for a strike, but all the socialist organisations argued that the class was not ready for a mass strike because of inadequate political preparation or contact with the soldiers. V Kayurav, a local Bolshevik leader, met representatives from women workers on the eve of Womens' Day and urged them to ". . . Act exclusively according to the instruction of the party committee."

The action was intended to be limited to factory meetings in order to make propaganda. The socialist groups all underestimated the mood of the women workers in the factories. However the lack of control by the political leaders over these women did not mean that the action was totally unprepared as some Bolsheviks seemed to think. One account of the lead up to the strikes records that:

"The largely female staff of the Vasilesky Island trolley-park, sensing general unrest a few days before February 23rd, sent a woman to the neighbouring encampment of the 180th Infantry Regiment to ask the soldiers whether they would shoot at them or not. The answer was no, and on the 23rd, the trolley-car workers joined the demonstration."

On the morning of the 23rd several illegal meetings were held in textile factories in the Vyborg district around the theme "War, high prices and the situation of the woman worker!'. Anger boiled over at these meetings. One by one they voted to strike, but did not leave their protest at that. Taking to the streets in their thousands the women marched to nearby factories, shouting for the workers, women and men to join them. The flying picket was dramatically effective. By 10.00 a.m. ten factories were shut with 27,000 workers on strike. By noon it was 21 plants with 50,000 strikers! Many accounts report the women entering factories, banging on the gates, throwing snowballs at windows to get workers out. It seems that where factories did not immediately respond to the call to join the action, more direct methods were used. Flying rocks and pieces of iron were persuasively used at some plants. In the Vyborg district there were 59,800 men and women on strike by the end of the day—61% of all the factory workers.

Rank and file Bolsheviks played a leading role in pulling plants out alongside the women workers, but many of the leaders were far more reluctant. The Vyborg leader Kayurov wrote later:

". . . to my surprise and indignation . . . we learned . . . of the strike in some textile factories and of the arrival of a number of delegates from the women workers who announced [that they were going on strike]. I was extremely indignant about the behaviour of the strikers, both because they had blatantly ignored the decision of the district committee of the party, and also because they had gone on strike after I had appealed to them only the night before to keep cool and disciplined."

Despite such indignation the Bolsheviks were able to quickly overcome these feelings and seize the opportunity offered to them. Agreeing to build the strike they gave political leadership by raising the slogans "Down with the autocracy! Down with the war! Give us bread!"

In other districts of the city strikes that day were less extensive, but no less militant. Over the whole city between 20 and 30% of the workers struck, with over 80 factories shut. The demonstrators from the Vyborg district were determined to reach the governmental centre of Petrograd, but the police blocked their way at one of the bridges. Eventually the demonstrators began crossing the ice of the frozen River Neva. However the police still managed to contain them, albeit with difficulty. A police report of the day explained:

"At 4.40 p.m. crowds of approximately 1,000 people, predominantly women and youths, approached Kazan

Bridge on the Nevskii Prospekt from the direction of Mikhailovskaia Street, singing and shouting 'give us bread!'."

The demonstrations were not confined to those who went on strike—women queuing for bread quickly joined in the action. One manager reported coming out from his bakery shop to announce that there was no more bread:

"No sooner had this announcement been made than the crowd smashed the windows, broke into the store and knocked down everything in sight."

Such acts were widespread, reflecting the anger and desperation, mainly of women and youths. the Bolsheviks argued against "vandalism" and tried to direct the protests by organising meetings and by calling for a three day general strike plus intensified propaganda towards soldiers.

In the following days the number of workers on strike increased steadily. The government sent police and troops in to disperse the demonstrators by any means necessary, but the revolutionary wave was able to meet this challenge by winning Cossacks over and eventually whole regiments joined the insurgents. Workers were arming themselves in their militia, and it was women workers who played a vital role in breaking the troops from the regime. As Trotsky's account reveals:

"A great role is played by women workers in the relation between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command:"Put down your bayonets—join us!" The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened, a joyous "Hurrah!" shakes the air. The soldiers are surrounded. Everywhere arguments, reproaches, appeals—the revolution makes another forward step."

The mass strike eventually won to its side the vast numbers of peasants-in-uniform, the soldiers. Exhausted by the deprivation caused by the war, sickened by its carnage, these soldiers were eager for change. The action of the working class ignited their rebellion and made the fall of the autocracy inevitable. Without its military power the mighty Romanov dynasty could not last a minute. The Tsar's wife expressed the arrogant shortsightedness of the autocracy when she wrote to her husband:

"This is a hooligan movement, young people run and shout that there is no bread, simply to create excitement, along with workers who prevent others from working. If the weather were very cold they would probably stay at home. But all this will pass and become calm, if only the Duma will behave itself."

These words, expressing hope that events would be settled by the weather and the tame parliamentarians of the Duma (its Bolshevik deputies were in prison or exile), were forced down the throat of the pampered Tsarina by the actions of the masses, by the revolution. Within the borders of the Russian empire modern capitalism coincided with a peasant economy that was staggering in its backwardness, and meant misery for some hundred million peasants and their families. The combination of a land starved peasantry and a highly concentrated urban working class (some four million strong) obliged the autocracy to maintain a vicious political dictatorship. Only thus could the rule of the landlords and the interests of capital be guaranteed. But the existence of the autocracy merely intensified the contradictions of Russia's combined and profoundly uneven social development. The war exacerbated those contradictions to the limit. When they exploded the seemingly all-powerful Tsarist regime fell in only a matter of days. As Trotsky and Lenin both observed, the chain of world capitalism had broken at its weakest link.

The development of the revolution and the abdication of the Tsar opened up a whole new period for the Russian working class. The Provisional Government that emerged from the February Fevolution was staffed by bourgeois politicians and in an unstable position, balanced as it was alongside the organs of a different kind of power, the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Within the factories workers were emboldened—the factory committees sprang up, control was demanded over pay and conditions. The workers' militia conflicted with the weaker civil militias of the government.

Women workers continued to play an important role. They were among the most determined to win an eight hour day. They sought decent wages and supported demands for equal political rights including suffrage. Indeed the first major strike against the Provisional Government was of 3,000 women laundry workers who struck for the eight-hour day, lining wages and municipalisation of the laundries. The strike, in May 1917, lasted six weeks and Kollontai was sent in by the Bolsheviks to work alongside the women. The Bolsheviks had quickly responded to the militancy of women in 1917 and set up a Womens' Bureau led by Vera Slutskaya. This relaunched *Rabotnitsa* and built up support in the factories, among soldiers' wives and led large demonstrations against the war.

The role of women workers in the Russian Revolution was magnificent, and taught the revolutionary leadership much. But their very spontaneity meant that they were not always in the revolutionary vanguard throughout 1917. They struck, demonstrated and rioted because of the intensity of the oppression, but this also reflected their lack of organisation, their newness to political and trade union activities. This is often true of working class women—their role within the workforce as a "peripheral" element, poorly paid, shifted in and out of work depending on the fortunes and needs of capitalism—leads to them being generally poorly organised in unions and political parties. Even where membership of unions is high, women are rarely active in the leadership because of their oppression which denies them time, due to domestic commitments, and obstruction by male leaders.

This lack of traditional organisation has contradictory results—on the one hand women can be, as the February Revolution shows, the most militant fighters because they are unfettered by the conservatism which can so often take root inside the union organisations. But on the other hand it makes women easy targets for propaganda which may be

anti-working class. In the weeks after the February Revolution thousands of working class women were mobilised by liberal bourgeois feminists to demonstrate for womens' suffrage and continuation of the war! The Bolsheviks were able to establish a mass base among women by mid-1917 which led them once again to demonstrate against the war, but this took special efforts at organisation and propaganda.

The lessons we can learn from the Bolsheviks and working women in this period are rich indeed. The revolution, as Lenin was to point out years later, would never have succeeded without the mobilisation of the women. Revolutionaries must never underestimate the centrality of relating to women workers. Special forms of propaganda and organisation are needed to win them to the side of the revolutionary party, but once won, they will be the most brave and militant fighters for they have so much to gain!

From Permanent Revolution 5, Spring 1987

Divided class, divided party: the SWP debates women's oppression

For the past few years the SWP theoreticians have been arguing over whether working class men benefit from women's oppression. The answer seems fairly straight forward. Yes. They have higher wages than women, are more unionised, have more valued skills, they don't have to do much housework, and don't face problems of sexual harassment and assault.

Indeed, one of the leading contributors to the debate, Lindsey German, points out: "The appeal of the argument that men benefit from women's oppression is a real one, and highly understandable. It appears to reflect reality." [1]

Yet she, along with Chris Harman, Sheila McGregor and in the background Tony Cliff, argue that to hold to such a view is non-Marxist, automatically leading to theories of patriarchy and separatism. Waging a battle on this powerful group is John Molyneux, arguing that it would be absurd to deny the benefits male workers receive.

The context of the debate

To understand the importance of this debate it must be seen in the context of the SWP's overall position on the woman question. In 1977 the SWP launched local Women's Voice groups around their women's magazine of the same name. Prior to that *Women's Voice* (WV) had simply been the women's paper of the SWP. With the launch of the groups, the SWP were responding to pressure from the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). In an abrupt "feminist" turn they tried, briefly, to compensate for their own history of years of totally ignoring the problem of women's oppression.

The new *Women's Voice* aimed at becoming a "socialist *Spare Rib*", but rather than being the means of taking revolutionary ideas into the WLM it became a vehicle for bringing feminist theories and practice into the SWP. When the SWP leadership recognised this rather than fight to turn WV groups into organisations of militant working class women, armed with a revolutionary programme, they decided to clamp down on the groups, deny them any powers and make WV the "sister organisation of the SWP" in 1979. At this stage Cliff was alone in wanting to completely wind up any women's organisation, but over the next two years he managed to win over the majority of the leadership to argue that any separate organisation for work on women was wrong in principle. This was won in 1981 and WV groups were subsequently closed down. The SWP followed its time honoured routine of centrist zigzagging. When recruits looked likely from the WLM it gave free rein to the feminists within the SWP. But when Women's Voice looked like being an obstacle to recruitment a "Bolshevik" attitude to the woman question was hastily restored.

Male benefits and patriarchy theories

In 1981 as part of the campaign against feminist ideas in the SWP, Lindsey German published an article, "Theories of Patriarchy": "I would argue . . . that not only do men not benefit from women's work in the family (rather the capitalist system as a whole benefits), but also that it is not true that men and capital are conspiring to stop women having access to economic production." [2]

German raises this in the context of an argument against feminists who she quite correctly criticises for seeing men as the cause of women's oppression. But in her zeal to show that men are not the cause, and that working class men do not have any real interest in perpetuating women's oppression she ends up virtually denying the very existence of the inequalities between men and women in the family. Instead she says that the role of women in the family is part of a division of labour, without saying who does better out of this division.

German's analysis of the oppression of working class women glosses over the role played by male workers and the organised labour movement, in maintaining that oppression. In the past many skilled craft unions excluded women, and allied themselves with the bosses in order to "protect" their trades. At the moment a significant number of craft unions still do this. Look at the NGA for example. But while it would be wrong to think that the working class and its organisations are automatically opposed to women's oppression it would be equally wrong to say that there is a "conspiracy" between all men. Rather we must understand why male workers often perceive women as a threat to their own conditions, and are therefore prey to a reactionary alliance with the bosses.

This debate relates closely to the question of Women's Voice because if you conclude, as German, Harman and McGregor do, that male workers gain nothing from the oppression of women, then it leads to the programmatic conclusion that so long as we all unite in struggle the sexist ideas of male workers will simply fade away. They insist categorically that there is no need for women workers or women revolutionaries to build special forms of organisation. In contrast, John Molyneux, having satisfied himself that working class men do gain significantly from women's oppression, concludes that "special efforts and special methods of agitation and propaganda" directed at working class women will be necessary to ensure that their interests are not "neglected, ignored and forgotten". [3] But he has no strategy for building a communist-led working class women's movement. His position would lead to a re-run of Women's Voice with all the negative, potentially feminist, features of that project.

Just an hour or two a day?

To bolster the SWP leadership's arguments Chris Harman repeated German's position in an article in 1984. [4] He outlines a general understanding of women's oppression, within which he once again tackles the problem of the role of male workers. He does it in the form of answers to an imagined argument against the Marxist position—that "working class men are involved in maintaining the oppression of women and benefit from it, so they can't be involved in the struggle to end it ". Against this Harman states:

"In fact, however, the benefits working class men get from the oppression of women are marginal indeed. They do not benefit from the low pay women get—this only serves to exert a downward pressure on their own pay . . . The benefits really come down to the question of housework. The question becomes the extent to which working class men benefit from women's unpaid labour."[5]

Harman goes on to try and measure the benefits men receive from housework:

"It is the amount of labour he would have to exert if he had to clean and cook for himself. This could not be more than an hour or two a day, a burden for the woman who has to do this work for two people after a day's paid labour, but not a huge gain for the male worker." [6]

In this argument he says he is excluding the labour involved in bringing up children, an invalid, formal division since for most women housework is done for the whole family, whether there are children around, older relatives or anyone else she is expected to care for. But even if we take Harman's category of a couple with no dependents, the idea that "an hour or two a day" less work for the man is not much of a gain is patently absurd. How many workers would accept one to two hours on their working day without a struggle? The fight for the eight hour day has been one of the working class's most determined battles, and now Harman happily adds two hours onto this for women when they get home, saying it makes little difference!

Harman lapses into idealism in assessing the relative importance of the marginal gain that he concedes men do get as a result of women's oppression. He argues:

". . . It cannot be said that the working class man has any stake in the oppression of women. Whatever advantages he might have within the present set-up compared with his wife, they are nothing to what he would gain if the set up was revolutionised." [7]

Socialism will be better for all of us. But the whole point is that outside of the context of major class battles that place class wide struggle and socialism on the agenda, advantages gained within the status quo by sections of the working class are very important to people. If the prospect for the dramatic change referred to by Harman seems a dim and distant one, with closures and unemployment the more immediate prospect then, hanging on to existing benefits becomes a real motivating force for many working class men.

How else can we explain the popularity of "women out first" solutions? This reveals that, while working class men do not have a significant stake in defending the existing society, they are motivated, in real life, by the desire to cling to marginal and transient gains they have received courtesy of this society. Only if the prospect of the revolutionary alternative becomes real and immediate—and here the building of a mass revolutionary communist party is decisive—can the defence of sectional, or in this case sexual, advantages be really transcended and replaced by the fight for the historic, common interests of working class men and women.

Men oppressing women

It was this particular aspect of Harman's article that drew fire from John Molyneux. He wrote:

"The problem with the Harman/Cliff/German position is that in minimising or denying the material roots of the sexual division in the working class it underestimates the obstacle to achieving class unity and therefore underestimates the conscious intervention required by the revolutionary party to overcome that obstacle." [8]

Molyneux himself puts forward a position which recognises the benefits male workers gain from women's oppression. He points to this as the material root of the strength of sexism within the class. Hence it is necessary

for the revolutionary party to take special measures to counter this pressure. But from saying this Molyneux slips into arguing that men oppress women within the family.

The fault with Molyneux's position (despite it being much more sophisticated than that of his opponents) is that he does embrace tenets of feminist theory. He bases his argument exclusively on the relationship between men and women in the family. He fails to take the relationship of social forces as his first premise. Materialists must start from an understanding of oppression within the context of the dominant determining features of society, namely class antagonisms. All oppression is subordinate to, though stemming from, this fundamental contradiction in class society. The family is an integral part of capitalist society, but it is impossible to understand its role and the relationship of individuals within it if you do not start from its function for capitalism. Molyneux starts, not from the role of the family, but from the unequal division of labour within it. He asks how this is maintained:

"To a considerable extent of course it is maintained directly by the system through its socialisation of women into the housewife role, and, even more importantly, through its payment of higher wages to male workers . . . But it is also maintained by the system through male workers who refuse to do an equal share of the housework or, worse, insist that their wives do all of it." [9]

By simply looking at the family Molyneux cannot see that the key is not really who does what housework, but the actual existence of a privatised sphere of domestic labour. He concludes that men are actually the oppressors within the working class family. His paraphrase of Engels' analogy that "within the working class family he (the male worker) is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat" does not save him from lapsing into feminism. The key question is what social conditions give rise to this oppressive relationship and how can they be overcome. For Engels, the systematic exclusion of women from social production was decisive in explaining why women were oppressed, not the division of labour within the family itself. This was in fact the result of capitalism's exclusion of women from the factories.

Women have to lose their chains to the household if they are to acquire the strength and solidarity to be fully liberated. Marx and Engels recognised this:

"We can already see . . . that to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labour. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time." [10]

The theoretical questions answered

To understand the role working class men do play in the oppression of women it is necessary to look at the material roots of that oppression. It is wrong to look at the division of labour within the home, with women doing more than men, and simply conclude that therefore men oppress women. In this instance Sheila McGregor is actually partially correct in her reply to Molyneux when she says: "Women's oppression does not consist in an unequal division of labour in the home but in a division of labour between the point of production and the home." [11] But McGregor herself then proceeds to make the equal and opposite error of denying the important role that the unequal divisions within the family have on determining consciousness.

The oppression of working class women is rooted in the existence of the family as the place where people live, are fed and clothed, and children are brought up to become the next generation of workers. The whole process, the reproduction of labour power, actually results in workers, both the existing generation and the next one, being presented to the bosses ready for work. That special commodity, labour power, without which capitalism would perish, is produced not by a factory or in a socialised sphere of production, but in the private household of each family.

The role of women in this process is very specific. Women are the prime domestic workers who labour, unpaid, to bring up children, keep the house and care for any other dependent relatives. This occurs whether or not women have jobs outside the home. The primary role of the vast majority of working class women remains that of mother/wife. The centrality of this to capitalism is clear. Without the labour of these women in the home workers could be reared, fed and kept alive, but only at the cost of massive investment in the socialised places that would take the place of the family. Capitalism is incapable of completely socialising housework in this fashion even when women are needed to work in the factories and offices.

The role women have in the family is the very basis of their oppression. It is not a matter of a technical "division of labour" such as exists in the class generally between different trades, because it actually condemns women to a sphere of work which is isolated, where the work itself is tedious, the pressures of feeding and maintaining the family are enormous—in short as Lenin described it:

". . . She continues to be a domestic slave because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery." [12]

This work, not only tedious and unproductive in itself, also means that women are denied social contact with others of their class outside their immediate family. This is of central importance in preventing women from becoming organised, politically active and rebellious—they never have the solidarity and support of socialised production.

So McGregor is correct to say that the root of women's oppression lies in the distinct area of domestic labour in the family. Where she is wrong is that in concluding that since "wives perform their duties on behalf of capital" she can reject the idea that working class men receive any benefit from that oppression. She argues that the division of labour is imposed on men and women, and that neither can escape their respective roles under capitalism. She notes that this

division is reflected in wage bargaining, yet appears to be saying there is nothing that can be done about this under capitalism. The problem with her approach is that in trying to show that this is a class not a gender issue, McGregor ends up saying both sides suffer the same, thereby almost denying the fact that it is women, not men who are oppressed. This leads to a capitulation to the backward and conservative prejudices of men in the labour movement.

Working class men do benefit from the oppression of women, not because they are the cause of women's oppression, or that they are in some sort of unholy alliance with the bourgeoisie to keep women downtrodden, but by the very fact that they themselves are not specially oppressed as a result of their gender. The institution of the family is of greater material benefit to them than it is to women. This simple fact of life has enormous implications for the class and its consciousness both as individuals and collectively. Working class organisations are not automatically or spontaneously opposed to women's oppression, just as in fact they are not spontaneously socialist, contrary to the economist views of the SWP which see socialist consciousness stemming purely from struggle and not from the fight for communist leadership.

The struggle of revolutionaries to win the class to a conscious opposition to woman's oppression, which we know to be in the overall interests of the class, will be precisely that. A struggle. There are many examples of the problems women have had in attempting to get their own struggles taken seriously by the labour movement. Recent examples such as the Grunwick women and the Trico strikers only add to the list. The resistance men have is certainly partially based on their own position, whereby they fear loss of wages if women are brought into their jobs, and fear lack of a stable family or not having their tea on the table when they get in from work. When this happens—for example men opposing their wives' involvement in the miners' wives movement, something that was, unfortunately, common—then it must be fought.

Oppression and sectionalism

Understanding the roots of women's oppression in the family provides the clearest answer to the problem being debated. Do working class men benefit from women's oppression? The question must be answered dialectically, something neither side in the SWP debate manage. When looked at in terms of the relationship between social forces, classes, as historical materialism must, then clearly the answer is no. Oppression weakens and divides the class. It creates an obstacle to the unity of the workers against the common class enemy. Women's oppression and the existence of the family also deny the working class, men, women and particularly youth, many rights and freedoms. It imprisons them in relationships and commitments which are often unhappy and oppressive.

But this answer is not enough. Oppression serves to divide and weaken the class precisely because it does create different interests between groups. The clearest examples are perhaps of oppressed nations, where imperialist powers plunder the land, the natural resources and the labour power of the indigenous people. The super-exploitation of workers in imperialised countries undoubtedly weakens the world working class and drives up the overall level of exploitation. But more than that, the acceptance by sections of the working classes in the oppressor nations that "their" country is doing the right thing, weakens the world proletariat even more, as Marx explained with regard to British workers over the question of Ireland. But the reason why British workers fail to challenge the imperialist banditry of their rulers is not just based on excellent bourgeois propaganda, powerful as that may be. Relative to the workers in the oppressed nations, the workers in the imperialist country are better off. Indeed the super-profits from imperialism are in part used to grant improved living conditions to the working class of the "home" country in order to try and maintain social peace. This is the material basis of the labour aristocracy.

The SWP's economism means for them that any and every economic struggle can—from within itself—generate socialist consciousness. The sectional and sexual divisions in the working class are down played. Yet, this ignores the fact that many struggles are conducted on a sectional, not a class-wide basis. Divisions in the class, between men and women, skilled and unskilled, black and white, cannot be wished away or overcome by exhortation. The SWP have no scientific understanding of these divisions. This was clear in Cliff's analysis of the labour aristocracy quoted approvingly by John Molyneux to back up his case. Cliff basically attacks Lenin for suggesting that imperialist capitalism divided the working class, by bribery, into an aristocracy and a mass, and that the aristocracy was the social base of reformism and the bureaucracy. Not so, says Cliff.

Capitalist prosperity allows the whole working class to gain and is thus the root of reformism; capitalist crisis sounds its death knell. This jimcrack "Marxism" led Cliff to declare that reformism was as good as dead in the early 1970s. Yet, like Lazarus, it rose from the dead and later ushered in the "downturn". Cliff's theory did not equip the SWP to understand reformism's 1974 triumph at the polls. For them, no labour aristocracy existed; therefore, in an economic crisis reformism would collapse, having no social base.

This theory in fact reflects the sectionalism that exists in the working class. It suggests that not only are workers' historical interests identical but so are their immediate interests; hence, ever more sectional struggles would eventually add up to revolution. This ignored the reality of differentials, demarcation disputes, racist strikes, opposition to women's strikes. All of these testified to the fact that as capitalism did go into crisis and as the leadership of the unions failed to defend the interests of their members on a class wide basis, the real existing divisions in the class did not always disappear.

Sometimes they sharpened. Certainly, the divisions in the class are more complex—and Lenin was well aware of this—than simply between an aristocracy and "the masses", but that division does exist and does have a material basis.

Chris Harman, Sheila McGregor and Lindsey German deny that the working class can ever have contradictory interests. To accept that contradictions do actually exist within the working class leads to revolutionaries having to argue with certain sections of the class that they support others in struggle for the solidarity and strength it gives to the whole class. The SWP would find such political arguments hard. They prefer therefore to opt for an analysis which says all workers have identical immediate interests.

McGregor poses it most clearly when she takes up the analogy used by Molyneux about the relative privileges of protestant workers in Northern Ireland. Molyneux argues, correctly, that these material privileges, in terms of jobs, housing and pay, although nothing in comparison to the privileges of the ruling class, nevertheless have an important effect on the protestant workers. They form the material roots of Orangeism and of the powerful cross class alliance between these workers and their exploiters. Whilst it is certainly true that the oppression of the Catholics is not in the overall interests of the working class, to the Protestant workers it appears that the defence of their own jobs and privileges is of more immediate importance than the civil rights of other workers.

Against Molyneux, McGregor argues:

"If, however, you separate off the immediate from the long term interests of Protestant workers, as John does in his article, then you end up arguing not only that it is in the immediate interests of Protestant workers to preserve their privileges over Catholics, but that unity is not in the immediate interests of the Protestant working class and therefore that Protestant workers realising their revolutionary potential is not in their immediate interests."[13]

This is a shoddy piece of polemic. McGregor hopes to show that Molyneux is ditching revolutionary Marxism. Having pointed out to us already that revolution is already on the agenda, McGregor, using chop logic, believes she has disproved Molyneux's argument. Molyneux clearly uses the example of the Protestants to show why revolutionaries must understand conflicting sectional interests in order to try and consciously overcome them, not pander to them, as McGregor suggests.

McGregor uses the example of the Nottinghamshire scabs to try and show how false it is to believe that one section of the class can have different interests. In an amazing feat of logic she points out:

"The majority of miners in Nottinghamshire thought it was in their immediate interest not to join the national miners strike but scab instead. Do we therefore postulate that their deeply held backward views somehow coincided with their immediate interests? Is it true they got 52 wage packets striking miners did not receive, so did they immediately benefit from working? Does that mean it was in their immediate interests to scab?" [14]

Yes! That in fact would be a good definition of a scab: someone who puts their own immediate, short term gain before that of the class or his or her workmates. But you cannot deny that they did get 52 wage packets and a better wage deal as a result of scabbing. Of course revolutionaries must point out that in fact the Notts scabs have severely damaged their own interests by their actions. Their 52 wage packets will seem little compensation when their pits are closed, when management impose stricter working conditions and pay restraint. They are left weakened by having lost their collective strength as trade unionists, committed as they are now to company unionism and class collaboration. It was on this basis that militants had to argue against the scabs, not just on money or immediate gain. In fact the whole basis of that Great Strike was the class conscious understanding of "us now, you next". Arguing these points with any section of workers can be difficult, especially in conditions where so few struggles are victorious. The SWP with its method of tailing the most advanced militants rather than offering revolutionary leadership, are left unable to argue for anything other than consolation to workers that little or nothing can be done, however, because of the "downturn". When that is over we can get back to good old basic (sectional) trade unionism.

The examples of the Nottinghamshire scabs and the Protestant workers in Ireland points to another important factor in the argument. The bourgeoisie are well aware of the sectional divisions within the class. They consciously exploit these. They like nothing more than to see workers in pitched battle with each other. They are prepared to fund and fuel these divisions, hence the payment of scabs during strikes even when they are unable to actually produce anything because no-one else is at work. By offering higher wages to certain sections, and by encouraging prejudices they hope to weaken the class.

Women's oppression and working class men

To return to the original debate, the position of working class men is similar to other sections of the class with particular benefits or advantages. Working class men do not cause the oppression of women, either generally or in their own families and relationships. However, they certainly do perpetuate that oppression, all too often in brutal ways. When men deny their wives rights to go out, to decide when to have kids, when to go to work, they are oppressing them. But similarly, when mothers deny their daughters rights to go out, wear what they want, do what they want, they too are perpetuating oppression.

But this is not way really the point. Relations between individuals are not of the same scale in determining roots and causes of oppression as class antagonisms. It would be false to conclude that since women often oppress their daughters that they are therefore the oppressors or that they have any real interest in maintaining that oppression. But what has to be understood is that the existence of the family, the ties that women, men and children have to it in terms of the necessary functions it performs (which capitalism fails to provide in any other way), affect behaviour and consciousness.

Perhaps the best way to explain the difference between working class women and men is to understand that they are not social equals. And if a man enjoys greater opportunities relative to a woman then clearly he has certain benefits over a woman and these benefits are sanctified by

an edifice of sexist ideology. Far from this edifice crumbling as a result of common struggle alone, as Harman, McGregor and German assert, the Bolsheviks—in the shape of Trotsky—had a different view. After the conquest of state power Trotsky argued that social inequality still existed and found its reflection in the oppressive relations that prevailed in the family. His standpoint is a million miles from that of German et al:

"But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionised before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in the normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics. As long as the woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all her chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme." [15]

A rather different perspective on the one or two hours Harman so complacently writes of. The real world of household drudgery that millions of working class women endure every day is seemingly a mere trifle to him. Real communists recognise the weight of these chains and fight to smash them.

Ideas do not fall from the sky. Peoples' consciousness is based on material conditions, which themselves are extremely complex. Bourgeois ideology is very important, but does not in itself explain why, for example men are sexist to the extent that they are. Such sexism is based at least in part on the fact that men would prefer to keep their dominant position which has led to certain apparent advantages. Of course women themselves are often the most vigorous defenders of the family and in many societies, the church. They defend those things which most reinforce their own oppression. It is clear that women are often backward in their ideas due to their isolation in the home and their lack of contact with other workers.

However, it is also true that it is women (a militant minority of women) who understand and struggle against their oppression. This is where the difference between the sexism of men and the "sexism" of women lies. It is women workers, not male workers, who will lead the struggle against that oppression, and most rapidly ditch their prejudiced ideas. For men it will always be more of a struggle because it challenges so much and yet does not appear to immediately benefit them, not that is until they fully understand the liberatory potential of women's emancipation and its inseparable links with the achievement of proletarian power.

When it comes down to the question of how revolutionaries relate to women workers the purposes of the debate in the SWP becomes apparent. If male workers gain nothing but actually suffer as a result of women's oppression, then it should be no problem to convince them of the need to support women's liberation. This is the argument of Harman/McGregor/German who say that in periods of struggle, like the miners' strike, the Russian Revolution and other examples, it becomes apparent to all that women's oppression weakens them and it is thus in the interests of all workers to fight it. McGregor points out that: "The role of miners' wives during the strike is, in fact, a powerful illustration of the fact that it is in the immediate interests of working class men for women to fight their oppression and for men to support them in doing so." [16]

This is in fact a gross oversimplification of what happened. In the first place, the women were struggling in support of the men, not against their own oppression. As the strike developed a small (but very militant and prominent!) minority of miners wives broke out of the confinement to soup kitchens and welfare, and began going out to pickets, to speak to other workers and build solidarity. These women necessarily came into conflict with their own and their husbands' ideas about "women's roles". And it was often not easy. Many women would tell of the problems they had getting the men to agree to stay at home and look after the children whilst the women went out to picket.

Obviously as a result of these battles the consciousness of many miners and their wives changed. But it was by no means automatic. The fact that the wives' organisation was denied associate membership status of the NUM soon after the strike shows the remaining prejudice of many of the men, not just to women, but to the militancy they represented.

Attitudes do change in the course of struggles, and this is why revolutionaries can be confident of winning millions of workers away from their prejudices in such situations. But it requires the conscious intervention of revolutionaries and class fighters to achieve this. The Russian Revolution—the other example used to show how anti-sexist the class is—demonstrates the potential. But the battles which women, in the Bolshevik Party as well as outside, waged in order to get their interests taken seriously, deserve study. The Bolsheviks were not themselves perfect; it took Kollontai, Inessa Armand, Nikolaeva and others to pressure them into setting up Women's Departments.

A communist conclusion to this debate would understand that women themselves are central to the struggle against their own oppression. Not all women are, however, because this is not primarily a sex question; but working class women, who have most to gain in overcoming oppression and exploitation, and from liberation and working class power. Recognising the central part women will play in their own liberation is not a concession to feminism as the SWP old guard would say:

"We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves."

And what rabid feminist said that? Lenin, in a speech to a conference of non-party women in September 1919. What Lenin also said which contradicts the SWP line of being opposed to special forms of work and organisation for women inside the party and outside, was:

"The Party must have organs—working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may

be called—with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among women . . . We must have our own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation, and special forms of organisation. This is not bourgeois "feminism", it is a practical revolutionary expediency." [17]

The members of the SWP who are confused by the debate over benefits would perhaps do better to spend their time studying the real history of revolutionary parties and their work on women. Cliff's distorted histories of Zetkin and Kollontai, followed by these shrouded excuses for a failure to take the woman question seriously, will teach them little of value. Study of the Bolsheviks, and of the German Socialist Women's Movement under Zetkin will be far more use.

Then perhaps the SWP would have more to offer the heroic miners' wives at the end of the strike than the patronising—"well join the SWP if you want to remain active". Women from the mining communities, just like other working class women who are thrown into militant struggle need to organise themselves, build a mass working class women's movement, fight not for feminism but for class unity including their own demands as women.

Within such a movement communists will fight for their own programme and their own leadership. Such a mass movement is not counterposed to the party, but an arena within which it can fight and grow. The SWP refuse to sanction or build such a movement. They fear too much their own weakness They cannot stand the possibility of contamination with feminism again. So rather than fight such ideas in practice, they retreat into their journals to conduct their debates in private.

Notes

1. *International Socialism* (IS) 2.32 p139
2. IS 2.12 p41
3. IS 2.25 p121
4. IS 2.23
5. Ibid p26
6. Ibid p27
7. Ibid p27
8. IS 2.25 p121
9. Ibid p120
10. Engels *Origins of the Family* L&W p221
11. IS 2.30 p94
12. Lenin *Collected Works* 29 p428 July 1919
13. IS 2.30 p92
14. Ibid p98
15. L Trotsky *Women and the Family* Pathfinder p21
16. IS 2.30 p93
17. Quoted in C Zetkin *Recollections of Lenin* p110