

ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION: THE NEXT PHASE

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Foreword

This document is a limited, short-term update of our perspective on women's liberation. A full perspective would have to be based on both a fuller analysis of the nature of the period and the short-run economic and political conjuncture, as well as a theoretical understanding of the position of women in advanced capitalist society. The present state of the US discussion on women's liberation, however, does not permit the luxury of waiting until these theoretical foundations are laid. The Landy-Tabor document, issued in commendable response to prodding from the ranks and to the clear need for an updated perspective, proposes a turn away from the best traditions of the IS in regard to mass movements and struggles of the oppressed. Landy quite rightly urges that "comrades who disagree with a political line . . ." should "kindly consent to put forward their own positions so the organization can see both lines." It is in response to the urgency of this need that this document, which admittedly suffers from haste, is presented. This document is counterposed to Landy-Tabor, but does not incorporate my specific criticisms of their proposal, which will be presented in another form if time permits.

(1) The IS supports and participates in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) as a movement of the oppressed. We urge women, like all oppressed groups, to organize to fight their oppression. We point to socialist revolution as a process which can make possible the liberation of women and other oppressed groups, but even in a revolution we think organized struggle for such liberation will quite likely be necessary. Today, for oppressed groups to be heard in class and revolutionary organizations their independent organization in some form is also frequently necessary, and we support and defend it without quibbles.

(2) The organized expressions of the Women's Liberation movement are faltering, and the movement is not expanding as it should be. Even fewer are the expressions of that movement where we, an organization with socialist principles and a working-class orientation, can put our politics into effective practice. However, the influence of WL consciousness continues to be felt throughout the society, and small groups of student and academic women, study groups, radicals, health-oriented women, consciousness-raising groups, anti-abortion groups and the like continue to exist. We do not exclude the possibility of some real gains, depending upon the intensity of the struggle, and we call for massive militant struggle for such gains where we can. We recognize, however, that the ultimate fate of the organized women's movement in this phase depends upon its role in relation to the upsurge of working-class struggle in both industrial and political forms. We expect such an upsurge and see what appear to be its first glimmerings. We participate in WL activities, guided by our industrial priorities, the possibility of turning other groups in a working class direction, by recruitment possibilities and by the general relevance of such activities to the struggle.

(3) The working class movement itself, whose main visible expression today is the trade union movement, suffers from its failure to integrate women and their needs as a serious part of its own program and activity. This failure reflects both the chauvinist consciousness of the traditionally male sectors of the class which are the backbone of the labor organizations, and the blindness of the labor bureaucracy,

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one aspect of its general social conservatism. An important part of our press activity is propaganda on the effects of this failure on specific struggles and situations, and on the injustices and oppression of which women in the working class are victims on and off the job. We seek, here as elsewhere, to be "tribunes of the people." Our press should in general strive to be less scholastic on these questions and to reflect genuine outrage when that is indicated. One way of achieving these goals is to develop women writers (whose work, of course, should not be confined to this question). A regular column or feature on women's issues should be restored to the WP.

(4) We address ourselves first of all to working class women in the workplace, urging them to adopt appropriate forms of independent organization in self-defense and in struggle for their specific interests (against oppressive treatment, unequal pay and work and promotion, for child care, maternity leave and the rest, for adequate representation in the unions) as well as classwide demands. Such independent organization will take varying forms, from informal shop floor groupings, to pre-meeting caucuses, to formal organizations of one sort or another. Without being mechanical we point to the need for serious organization to fight serious battles. Objectively, the interests of women workers in such groupings correspond to the interests of all workers insofar as defeating the social conservatism and dependence on the bourgeoisie of the labor bureaucracy is concerned. Hence we urge women workers to join the struggle against the bureaucracy in their own interests, and to point their demands in the direction of class unity whenever they can. If women's demands are not to be forgotten, however, it will generally be necessary to retain some form of independence. We are for united struggle, but we are for putting forward the interests of the most oppressed in any event. We pay special attention to the needs and demands of triply oppressed Black, Puerto Rican and Chicana working-class women.

(5) While other than propagandistic implementation will be difficult in the near future, we address ourselves to working class women who are not employed, and to employed working class women in their domestic and neighborhood situation. We recognize the necessity of breaking the isolation and infantilization of housewife roles in many cases, and of developing awareness of the social character of what appears to be individual oppression and misfortune. We support experiments with neighborhood women's committees around price controls, housing, schools, consciousness-raising, etc. and we make propaganda around these aspects of the social crisis which most directly affect the lives of such women.

(6) We address ourselves to radical women on campuses, in health care movements, in women's groups of all sorts. We point out that the fulfillment of the libertarian content of Women's Liberation and a serious political strategy both demand a turn towards working-class women as participants in the struggle for WL and as the basis for a WL movement relevant to the majority of women and capable of carrying out a truly effective struggle. To such women we point out that socialist revolution is the process that makes true WL possible. We seek to make the IS an organization such that entering it, for such women, is a means of extending and developing their struggle for WL, rather than sacrificing or subordinating it, even in the short term. Items (5) and (6) are lower priorities than (4).

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(7) We insistently play upon the theme that a break with the Democratic Party is essential, in order to carry out the interests of the majority of women. It is this break that is central to our propaganda on the party question. We put forward the working-class mass party as the goal, but at present that is a propaganda slogan; the immediate question is the one of the break, e.g. not to subordinate WL to the needs of electoral campaigns, to reject and expose candidates who sell out WL (i.e. 95 per cent of the DP and GOP; the other 5 per cent are so linked to the others that a break with them is necessary too); to use direct action in preference to lobbying; IPA, etc. We make this argument openly and with vigor, but not ultimatistically or as sideline kibitzers. We remain in mass movements, but not in leadership, when they have a mass militant character, even when they endorse the DP.

(8) Within a mass working-class party both our own general views and WL politics might not be the dominant ones. In such a case we would fight loyally but openly for a program to unite and advance the class and defend the most oppressed, and we would urge women to put forward demands in their own and in classwide interests, and join them in doing so.

(9) We continue to oppose the ERA until protective legislation has been extended to men everywhere. Even if p.l. is extended in California, for instance, we oppose ERA in California if p.l. is not extended in New York--the question is national. But today our focus is on the fight for extending protective legislation, or restoring it where it has been lost. If the ERA is passed, we will continue to stress the protection issue, but also utilize the ERA to build struggles around issues of equality, especially those of interest to working class women, e.g. conditions in public employment, credit, etc.

(10) In the abortion movement we stress the need for free medical care for women, and the need for mass action as opposed to lobbying, and emphasize the betrayals of the Democrats on the question. We also point out that the need for abortion is compounded by the difficulties faced in freely choosing to bear children in a decaying, crisis-ridden society. We make no concession to ZPG advocates or to those who seek to impose their own distaste for childbearing per se. We point out that without expanded social services, industrial expansion, pollution controls, educational reforms (including early childhood education and day care) and funding, decent housing, maternity and medical care, all denied us under capitalism, women do not have a truly free choice. Our position in favor of a genuine choice obligates us to demand, along with free abortion, the right to bear children with dignity and to raise them with hope.

(11) A specific effort is required in the IS to strengthen and develop the politics of women's liberation. The NAC is directed to appoint a national women's coordinator forthwith, to develop our theory and activity on the question, writing and speaking programs, and to join the Industrial Coordinator in advancing our industrialization program for women. WL will be a regular part of our new members' classes, will be discussed with potential recruits and in branch meetings on a regular basis. Support for the independent organization of women, respect for women comrades, and a fair share of necessary child care work are expected of all IS members.

(12) The IS has made some progress, but not enough, in developing women for leadership roles. The blind pressure of social inertia and of the outside world,

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and of the psychological burdens of women who grow up in this society, all conspire to inhibit their taking such roles. In the face of the weakening of the WL movement outside the IS, the entire organization must take responsibility to prevent backsliding from taking place. We call upon the NAC, the Women's Coordinator, and every large branch to take organizational measures, such as a periodic review of our performance on the question, special women's classes or groups, etc. Such organizational measures can assist, but cannot substitute for, the political will to move forward on this problem. None of this precludes active pressure by IS women to resolve this matter as they choose; in fact, such action will probably be required from time to time.

(13) Since we already have a perspective on the matter, this document does not go into detail on women and industrialization. The Industrial Coordinator, in consultation with the National Women's Coordinator, shall prepare a report for the next NC on the industrialization of women, in order to assess the effectiveness with which we have implemented our present perspective on this question, the difficulties that have emerged, and whether the tentative results justify any change in our course.

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