



WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

by the Rank and File Caucus, LA Branch

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Since our 1975 Womens' Perspective, we have concentrated almost exclusively on women entering one of our industrial priorities and attempting to build women's caucuses to fight the special oppression of women on the job. We are now beginning to see the results of that work, especially in USW District 31 and UAW Region 1. Here we have made contact with women workers and begun to build organization and activity with them.

But our exclusive concentration on women in our priorities has had other, less desirable effects. Since this has been our only activity directed toward organizing women, women who were not able to industrialize in heavy industry had virtually no role in the group. Women workers who we did recruit but worked outside our priorities and women who wanted to do political activity around feminist issues saw no point in being in the group, and many left. The talents of many of us who remained have not been exploited because there was no ongoing arena in which to work.

We have lost in two ways. First, by concentrating exclusively on the work of women in our priorities we lost sight of the very real opportunities for recruiting women. These opportunities existed not so much in heavy industry (where as with men, we will recruit in ones and twos only) but in the independent left. While the IS has been losing women and recruiting predominantly men, the independent left is full of women radicals who are involved in feminist organizing, many of whom are open to pro-working class politics.

Second, on a theoretical level, the exclusive emphasis on industrial work has led to distortions in our view of reality by leading us to ignore the continuing women's movement—even at times to say the movement did not exist! We lost touch with developments in the women's movement by neglecting or minimizing them (the debates on capitalism and the family, Brownmiller's work on rape, women's health issues). Since our industrial women's work raises feminist questions at a relatively low level, the politics of women's liberation were not raised concretely in our activity. Although we have been attempting to repoliticize the group since the last convention, some members have not been introduced to our basic politics on women's liberation.

The perspective for activity put forward by the Women's Commission continues these past mistakes. It is a perspective which may make sense for women in the UAW and USW, but it does not make sense for the organization as a whole. It fails to create meaningful roles for non-industrialized women or women members employed in industries other than the priorities. It does not put forward an analysis of the women's movement outside NOW, barely mentioning real activity which is going on in the radical feminist current of the movement. Especially, it does not address itself to the question of recruitment and party-building, and developing our politics of women's liberation.

We must begin to see that creating work for women not in our priorities does not take away from our commitment to building the working women's movement. The struggle for women's liberation will take place in the community as well as the workplace; growth in one current of the movement strengthens the other. We must be active in both areas. We must no longer counterpose work in the radical women's movement with work in our priorities. We can't build the work in our priorities without recruiting women. Our best chance of recruiting lies in the autonomous women's movement. Moreover, we can do as much, if not more, toward bringing feminist politics into our women's work in the priorities through working in the radical women's movement as we can by participating in NOW. The needs of party-building and building the working women's movement are not different. To build the working women's movement and to recruit to the IS requires that we re-orient our women's work by taking a serious turn toward the radical women's movement.

## THE RADICAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The weakness of the Women's Commission perspective is that it downplays the role of the radical feminist movement. We think we need to analyze seriously the state of this current of the women's movement. The following is just a start on that analysis.

After the victory for abortion rights in 1973, direct political activity declined in the radical feminist movement. Many women got involved in special projects for women: rape relief hotlines, feminist newspapers, women's health centers. Small groups studied political theory and came to anti-capitalist conclusions. Separatism gradually declined; socialist-feminism was born.

The early attacks on the gains won by the women's movement of the late Sixties and early Seventies caught the women of the radical feminist movement unprepared to mount a strong defence of women's rights. Response to the Supreme Court and Congressional attacks on abortion rights was weak. What national response there was organized by the National Abortion Rights Action League, hardly a radical organization in that its strategy is limited to letter-writing and lobbying. The declining importance of separatism and growth of socialist feminism had not resulted in most cities in new organizations capable of fighting back.

Dade County and subsequent attacks on lesbian and gay rights in Wichita, St. Paul and Eugene, in combination with the attacks on abortion rights and the failure to pass the ERA, have made it clear to radical women that women face more than a series of sporadic and unrelated attacks. The idea that there is a sophisticated, well-organized attack on the rights of women, people of color, and lesbians and gay men that is gaining broad support has firmly taken hold in the radical feminist community. Most importantly feminists, both gay and straight, have been brought back into direct political activity around these issues. Across the country coalitions formed to do local work for lesbian and gay rights during and after the Dade County campaign. 500,000 marched for gay rights in San Francisco on Gay Rights Day, 1978. In Pittsburg over 1000 people turned to protest a visit by Anita Bryant in May. Lesbian feminists and straight feminists who see that the attacks on gay people grow directly out of the attacks on women have become politically active. At this time most of this activity is directed by single issue coalitions which form to fight around a particular ballot issue or a visit by Anita Bryant. However, the need to form ongoing groups in light of continued attacks and the defeats at the hands of voters has taken hold. Several of the coalitions and groups currently active in the anti-Briggs work in California have explicitly stated their intention to remain active after the November election.

During the last year organizing has also stepped up around the issue of reproductive rights, with activity directed for the most part against the cuts in abortion funding and the defense of abortion clinics. The theoretical and practical growth of the independent women's movement over the past few years is illustrated in reproductive rights activity. Groups like CARASA are forming which emphasize women's right to control their bodies and their lives and to fight back against all forces trying to manipulate them. What is most notable about such groups from our perspective is that they are conscious from their origins of the necessity to reach out to and involve working class and minority women, to organize in workplaces, communities and high schools. NAM's 12-point Reproductive Bill of Rights, which has become a model for the Principals of Unity of many of these groups, is an important attempt to go beyond earlier biases in the movement--against mothers, women of color, working class women--and unify women. It speaks to the needs of minority women by opposing sterilization abuse. By including demands for quality child care, the Points reach out to women who are working mothers. These groups are very aware of past racism and class bias in the women's movement and are open to strategies of overcoming these past problems by, for example, doing strike support with health care workers (70% of whom are women), as one group did in Detroit during the Riverside nurses strike.

The women who form the core of these groups will not be involved in the National Organization for Women, which continues to represent the needs of middle-class white professional women. NOW's resolution opposing the thirty day waiting period for sterilization procedures is the most recent--and startling--example of its inability to correct past mistakes of the women's movement and to begin to build anew a broad-based movement which can unite women across racial and class lines. NOW's reasoning that such a waiting period smacks of "paternalism" is totally blind to the social reality that sterilization abuse has become racial genocide. In Puerto Rico over one-third of women of child-bearing age have been sterilized. 20% of black American women and 25% of Native American women have been sterilized. While federal funds for abortion have been slashed (County of LA abortions which are publicly funded have declined by 98%), HEW still pays for 80-90% of the cost of all sterilizations done in this country. Combatting sterilization abuse has become a primary activity and goal of anti-racist feminists. Most feminists see the need for unity in light of growing attacks against women and direct their practice in order to include as broad forces as possible--by, for example, working in united fronts with NARAL to sponsor demonstrations against cuts in abortion funding and by avoiding public criticism of conservative gay rights leaders. In contrast, NOW chose to make a divisive confrontation with the women who had been working across the country for the improved HEW sterilization abuse guidelines. NOW chose to uphold the rights of white, middle class women to be "free" of government paternalism over the rights of poor women of color to be free from the threat of sterilization abuse. This is the sort of leadership NOW is offering to the women's movement.

The radical feminist movement moves the struggle forward: raising issues first and leading the movement in terms of consciousness. The propaganda and independent activity of these women educates others who will take issues into organization like NOW (as, e.g. Carassa, who intervened at the NOW convention). Leadership of the working women's movement will develop here as well as in the workplace.

The women of the radical feminist movement come from a variety of backgrounds. Using the Action Coalition Against Briggs in Los Angeles as an example, there are health care workers, women in non-traditional jobs (both industrialized radicals in heavy industry and women who were radicalized in the process of industrialization), women from the feminist community (particularly feminist health care centers), students, independent leftists, and women from other left groups such as NAM and the Trend. Many of these women already consider themselves revolutionaries, that is they understand that the structure of capitalist society is incompatible with liberation for women. They are very much open to the next step: turning anti-capitalist politics into pro-working class socialist politics. Even those involved with political activity for the first time are hungry for analysis and practical ideas for activity. A few are already consciously evaluating revolutionary organizations.

Working in this sort of milieu will put IS women in contact with women with whom we could later do more workplace-oriented organizing or expand our work around general feminist issues. Working in the radical feminist milieu should be one of the prime aspects of our regroupment strategy, particularly work around reproductive rights issues with NAM women and independent feminists. Lastly and most importantly, it is primarily in the radical feminist movement where we will meet women who are or can be won to revolutionary politics today and from which we can recruit to the IS.

## A TURN TOWARD WOMEN'S WORK: THE PROPOSED PERSPECTIVE IS NOT ENOUGH

Acknowledging the importance of the radical feminist movement and having a perspective of intervening in it where possible does not mean abandoning our commitment to women's industrialization or building a working class women's movement. Our industrialization policy is part of our long-term strategy for the group. But we must begin to consider our work in the radical feminist movement to be of equal importance with trade union work when we are talking about building the women's liberation movement in this period. For the key to building a working women's movement in this period is to build links between the radical feminist and the trade union currents of the women's movement. We can build pro-working class politics in the radical women's movement and bring feminist consciousness to working class women. IS women are uniquely positioned to do this.

This does not mean ignoring the NOW current of the Movement. The alliance between the trade union bureaucracy and NOW will create openings for us to push further the work we have already been doing in the unions: to raise and organize around feminist issues, to take union women to ERA demonstrations (if NOW calls them), to take part in women's conferences, etc. The alliance will make doing feminist working class propaganda easier.

### The ERA and NOW Task Forces

But we must also recognize the limitations of both the ERA as an issue and of the NOW Labor Task Forces as an arena. The ERA is a limited issue for organizing activity. In states where we are active, with the exception of Illinois, it is already passed and there is no real movement to rescind it. For this reason, the ERA itself will not ordinarily be an issue for us to build activity around. Of course, if there is a national day of demonstration we would organize. But this will be of short duration and one national demonstration does not make a year's perspective for activity. Besides, we will be dependent entirely on NOW even for a demonstration to happen. Since we have said we will not be working in NOW itself, we cannot even be sure that the other radicals in NOW will be able to get NOW to call a demonstration. As part of our propaganda, of course, the ERA is useful. But it will be necessary to go beyond the ERA if we hope to raise the feminist consciousness of working women--and especially our contacts in industry. Gay rights, abortion, forced sterilization, and other issues far more controversial than the ERA will have to be raised. In fact, we believe that working women are open to talking about these issues and can be won to supporting actions around them, even if they are not yet ready or, because of their other commitments, able to be actively organizing around them. It is these issues, not just the ERA, around which we should orient our work, insofar as we are talking about bringing feminist issues into the workplace. Of course, our main activity in our caucuses will continue to be the shop-floor and union oriented work with women workers around issues of immediate concern to them--harrasment on the job, making the union take affirmative action seriously, etc.

The NOW Labor Task Forces may be open to us at the moment but we should not necessarily expect this situation to last, nor should we expect to be able to get much out of them where we don't already have a base of our own among working women. We should expect that we will quickly come into conflict with the NOW leadership and its allies in the labor bureaucracy, unless we are willing to downplay the major things we have to say to working women. For example, if we use the task force to build a conference on the women's movement, or women's issues, we will want to raise issues such as the need for the self-organization of

women workers, that they not rely on the Democratic Party or the trade union officials to get things for them. At the NOW convention we saw the efficiency with which the NOW leadership could control debate and even limit the expression of minority viewpoints by workshop panelists (e.g. in the sterilization abuse workshop). We should expect the NOW bureaucrats to move to either cut us out of the task forces, or close them down, and we should have no illusions that they will be unable to do this, given the predominance of middle class professional women in NOW as well as NOW's ties to the labor bureaucracy. This is not a period where there is a lot of mass motion anywhere; so we should in no way expect to be able to take the bureaucrats' organizations beyond the point they want them to go.

The Women's Commission proposes that we enter the NOW task forces in a limited way. We agree. The question is, how limited? For our women already organizing inside their unions--e.g. in USW and UAW--the task forces provide additional means to bring feminist issues into their work. But we have serious questions about how useful the task forces will be for other women comrades. The Women's Commission feels that we can use them for arenas for our non-industrialized women to make contact with working women. We suspect that the task forces will in fact not create opportunities for meeting and working with rank and file women greater than those we already have through the fact that we have women comrades organizing in industry. This is most importantly because we doubt that there will generally be many rank and file women actually active in the task forces. On the other hand, our women comrades will obviously have to take on the major burden or organizational responsibility for the task force work. In this case our women will be doing a lot of basically administrative work with little return. Furthermore, our non-industrialized women will encounter difficulties playing a strong role vis a vis the task forces. Where political differences come up, they will not be able to speak as union women with a base in their own workplaces. We understand that the Women's Commission has proposed working in the NOW task forces in part in order to provide our non-industrialized women a way to reach out to working women. We obviously agree this is a pressing need. But we believe that the NOW labor task forces will not usually be the answer. For this reason, we don't wish to pin a national perspective on them. But it should be clear that we are not against keeping an eye on them. It may be that the NOW task forces will tap an unexpected response among rank and file women--the way CLUW brought new women out at first. In that case, it would make sense to put more resources into the task forces.

#### Organizing the Unorganized

Besides the NOW Labor Task Forces and work around the ERA, the other proposed arena for intervention is organizing the unorganized. Propaganda around organizing the unorganized will be important, especially for our women in USW and UAW. But we will be able to actively intervene around this issue only rarely. This is, first, because the bureaucrats will do so little organizing of the unorganized. It is, second, because even where the bureaucrats do organize, they usually make it very difficult for anyone with a rank and file perspective to intervene. Thirdly, we do not have the numbers to undertake organizing on our own--not in any of our priorities (e.g. Teamsters), let alone in a subsection like women's labor organizing. Of course, there are occasions when we may be able to intervene, as say, the UAW women did around the Essex strike. But as a general perspective for women's work for the IS, organizing the unorganized is unrealistic at this time.

The Women's Commission proposed that we use the NOW labor task force to do this work. Again, we believe this is impractical. Intervening in most strikes from the outside

difficult to begin with. On the other hand, when we do intervene, we will often have to counterpose our strategy to that of the bureaucracy--as with the Essex strike. But this counterposition is precisely what NOW will not tolerate--they have no intention of offending their friends in the labor bureaucracy.

To be clear, we do agree that strike support is something we should be aiming for. But as we see it, our best chance to carry out this work is by getting into the independent feminist movement, to bring real support to women workers and show them that the feminist movement is relevant to them and their needs. Here we can begin to have the numbers needed, as e.g. the support the feminist community in Detroit organized for the Riverside nurses strike or the support that an organization like CARASA could mount.

Our work in the trade unions will be invaluable to women involved in reproductive rights and other work in the radical feminist movement. These connections will help us concretize what a perspective towards working class women means in practice. It will show we have a serious, long-term commitment to building a working women's movement. We will recruit from the radical feminist movement in large part because of our trade union work. At the same time, we will help create a pro-working class current in the feminist movement.

Our work in the radical women's movement will make it much easier for our industrialized women to bring feminist politics different from NOW's into their own organizing. They will be much better able to turn their women contacts away from reliance on NOW and the trade union officials to the degree that there is an alternative feminist movement with pro-working class politics for working women to relate to. Of course, this movement will be much smaller than NOW and not have the legitimacy conferred by the trade union officials. But if we are to begin to seek out and convince women militants of the need to build an anti-capitalist feminist movement, it is important to organize these links. If we are recognized by our industrial women contacts as sisters who have fought consistently for women's rights on the job, our support of radical feminist activities will be legitimacy enough and open these women to learning that the radical feminist movement has more to say to them than NOW.

## OUR PERSPECTIVE

### Making the Links: Work in the Radical Women's Movement

The big question is, what should our non-industrialized women be doing? We feel that wherever possible we should be working in the radical feminist movement. This is especially because we must put the highest priority on building the party. Our task will be to intervene with pro-working class, anti-racist politics. Our work in the unions and in the Red Tide put us in an excellent position to do this. They make it possible--because we have comrades in workplace and anti-racist organizing--for us to show radical feminists what can be done to unite women across racial and class lines. Some concrete examples:

- 1) In the anti-Briggs work we pushed for a trade union committee to do outreach to workers on the anti-labor aspects of the initiative. We sent speakers to union meetings, urged locals in which we had contacts to take a position against the bill. We helped pass an anti-Briggs position in Northern California TDU.
- 2) In the anti-Briggs work the Action Coalition Against Briggs participated in the Mobilization Against Police Terror, organized by CAPA and other black community organizations. They agreed that the attacks on women and people of color require a unified response and joint work.

- 3) In CARASA we have worked in the trade union committee. In the last couple months we have done a presentation on reproductive rights for an AFSCME local that attracted 100 women, mostly rank and file workers. A second presentation in Local 215 is planned.
- 4) Other links could be made by writing for feminist journals with a working class, anti-racist perspective, especially writing about our work. Off Our Backs, the only feminist newspaper which tries to reach a national audience, regularly reprints extracts from Workers' Power about our work in the unions. We should contact them about doing more in-depth, feature length articles about our work. Local feminist newspapers are always anxious for contributors. We have begun writing for Sister in Los Angeles and should (if we haven't already) write for What She Wants in Cleveland and other feminist newspapers.
- 5) In LA we hope to unite women in the Reproductive Rights Organizing Committee and some women from the anti-Briggs coalition to do support work in the upcoming appeal of a sterilization abuse case against County/USC Medical School.
- 6) Because we have contacts and comrades who are already organizing women in industry and in the black movement we can offer the feminists we work with openings into reaching working women--at the same time we can provide women's organizations with speakers at conferences who can inform feminists of the ongoing work of women workers.

How could our women in industry relate to this work? How could it help them to raise the level of consciousness among working women? What does building links between these two currents of the movement mean concretely? We could

- 1) Invite groups organizing on feminist issues in which we are working into the women's caucuses to make presentations/show slideshows/lead workshops. Inviting in groups who are actually involved in building around such issues as abortion, sterilization abuse, or gay rights is a much more concrete way of raising feminist issues than for our women to raise them abstractly as propaganda calls. It will build consciousness in women workers that they are part of the women's movement. If controversy arises over some presentations, we can point out that we are not taking a position by inviting speakers, but opening discussion on important issues to women.
- 2) We can urge caucuses to endorse propagandistically women's issues by passing pro-choice motions, or motions for maternity benefits like we have in District 31. We can urge the women's caucuses to push for the local to adopt these positions.
- 3) Our women in industry can present motions in their caucuses to endorse activities, like pro-choice or abortion clinic defense demonstrations, or join coalitions which are organizing around women's issues. They may be able to get the women's committee to organize their union to endorse or participate in these events.
- 4) We can try to involve our industrial contacts in activities called by radical feminist groups--demonstrations, International Women's Day events, etc. This will be



is difficult because for many working women being involved in the women's caucus may be all the political activity they can handle with the pressures of work and family. But as we would try to involve them in ERA demos, we should try to involve them in reproductive rights issues.

#### WHY ARE WE PUTTING FORWARD THIS PERSPECTIVE?

The Women's Commission perspective does not speak to the issue of party-building, which must be given a top priority by making it an integral part of all our perspectives. Recruitment is necessary to maintain the vitality of the IS and to build the working women's movement: we cannot do it with the number of women we now have. It is primarily in the radical feminist movement that we will meet women who would consider joining a revolutionary organization in this period. We will attract these women, as we have in the past, because of our serious orientation toward working class women as evidenced by our industrial work. But in order to keep women who are not in our priorities in the organization, we must also show that we are serious about the autonomous women's movement and we must create meaningful roles for these women within this movement. Having both on-going trade union work and serious work in the feminist movement will differentiate the IS from other groups.

The needs of the working women's movement coincide with our need for party-building. The best way to push forward the consciousness of working women is to contribute to the development of an anti-capitalist feminist movement. This movement is growing primarily out of the radical feminist movement, not out of NOW. Such a trend will enrich our work in the unions; no longer will the feminist movement be at odds with working class women.

Finally, work in the radical feminist will put our women comrades in the arena where feminist theory is developed, where issues are taken up first. Working in this milieu will educate our women in areas where we have lost touch with the women's movement and this activity will require us to develop politically. It is only when we have on-going activity in such a politicized feminist arena that the IS will ~~develop its women's~~ develop its women's liberation politics.