

CAMPUS SPARTACIST

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AUSTIN WOMEN'S LIBERATION CONFERENCE "ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK"

Part 1

On the weekend of Sept. 26-27, women from all over the state came to Austin for a Women's Liberation Conference, held on the UT campus. Though this conference was a step forward for Texas women in that it was their first real effort to communicate with each other on a more than city-wide basis, it also revealed many short-comings in the Women's Liberation movement.

The conference began with four short talks, on the family, the oppression of minority women, the psychological oppression of women, and women and the economy. These talks were supposed to stimulate discussion in the various workshops held that afternoon and the next. These talks might seem less important had the conference devoted more time to plenary discussions or presentations--as it was, with only a short plenary devoted to these talks (1½ hours), one devoted to a talk on abortion and birth control, and one devoted to workshop reports, these initial talks assume a greater importance.

The Nuclear Family as an Institution of Oppression

The talk on the family revealed the general low level of knowledge about that topic, more by its omissions than by its inclusions. Given by a member of Austin WLF, the talk began with stress on the idea that "there is an overwhelming social attitude that the family is the concern of women" (emphasis added). And, according to the speaker, women's liberation must therefore deal with the family.

This much is correct. It is true that under capitalism women are relegated to a domestic role--housekeeping, child-rearing, are women's tasks, which they cannot neglect even if they must assume additional tasks, such as full-time jobs outside the home. Women must decide how to deal with the role of the housewife--to accept it, or to reject it. But this point was not made by the speaker. Rather, her concern was with how to live with that role, how to

modify it, or oneself, so as to make it more bearable. "What we have to do is change our attitudes within the family." Implicit in her talk was acceptance of the domestic role. But rejection of this role, and rejection of the family as an institution was not even mentioned. More importantly, in the workshop that followed, the main concern was with forms of the family, and how to modify one's life style so as to avoid some of the oppression.

The family creates attitudes, but was not created by them. To believe otherwise, one must imagine some well-spring of evil human attitudes, such as original sin. The nuclear, patriarchal family came into existence because of the division of labor in primitive society. Women were tied to child-rearing and domestic duties because of biology--only they could nurse the young. Men were not bound by this biological necessity, so they hunted. Later, when animals were domesticated, they became the property of the men because they fell to men under the previously existing social roles. Men wanted to pass this, their first important property to their own children, and it was this desire that caused the "double standard" to arise. In the previously existing matriarchal society, lineage was easily traced: whoever bore a child was its mother. But determining the father of a child was more difficult, unless one assumed that the mother was monogamous. It made no difference whether or not the father was monogamous. Thus, social roles were not determined by attitudes, or even by chance, but by the historical development of property relations.

Women, to overcome the oppression of the family, must reject it as an institution. But a mere attitude of rejection is not going to accomplish this. To actually overthrow the family, which is now an institution profitable to the world ruling class (that group of people who own the means of production--the factories, etc.) will require a socialist revolution, which overthrows

Women's Liberation Conference, cont.

the ruling class, and abolishes the property relations that brought the family (and the ruling class) into existence.

To meaningfully discuss the family is to discuss these aspects: how the family oppresses women, how it came into existence who it profits, how to remove it as an oppressive institution. None of these were brought out at the Sept. 26 conference, except by members of the Spartacist League

Oppression of Minority Women

The talk on the oppression of minority women was given by Marianna Hernandez, SWP. Her talk, related more to racial oppression than to sexual oppression. Aside from purely statistical data, it was just a recitation of the SWP position that racial minorities are national groupings. The Spartacist League does not share this position, and it is certainly one which should not have been presented to the conference without discussion. It was, however the inevitable result of a format which allowed certain individuals (who, if only by default, took political positions) to make presentations, and then allowed little or no time for discussion. (Those who would like to learn more about the Spartacist position on racial minorities should read Marxist Bulletin #5 For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Question, and Spartacist "10 Black & Red.")

The Roots of Psychological Oppression

Evelyn Sell (another member of the SWP) gave a talk on the psychological oppression of women. Her talk, besides being elementary and superficial, especially for this audience, missed what should have been, to a socialist, the most important point--that psychological oppression is rooted in the economic oppression of capitalism, and can only be eliminated when capitalism is. To Evelyn Sell, the roots of women's oppression are in the Judae-Christian tradition, which has been male dominated. Since women cannot now snatch themselves out of their historic development, this certainly didn't tell women what they could do about psychological oppression--or even where to begin.

Women and the Economy

The talk on women and the economy was anti-socialist in its analysis, and offered no solutions socialist or otherwise. Some quotes: "The problem with the economy is that the male mentality, the male way of doing things has dominated it for 700 years (why that date?). "Women must adopt male values like competitiveness" to enter the labor force. "The feminine values like sensitivity are opposed to male values like competitiveness." We have a "male economic system." "The male, rational, logical response is rewarded even when the female, emotional response is more appropriate." The talk, by Barbara Wuensch, was permeated with such statements. Far from encouraging women to liberate themselves from the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, she encouraged women to apply them to an analysis of the economic system--and apparently did so with complete impunity. Not even from the SWP did we hear a criticism of this blatantly sexist, anti-Marxist analysis!

The problem is not that the economic system has a penis. The problem is that we live in a capitalist economic system in which profits are made from the exploitation, and super-exploitation, of women. Women are not paid equally for doing the same work as men (Wuensch did mention this last fact). Women's jobs are considered "extras", "supplements", even if the woman has no other source of income, and must support children. Women are exploited in doing the socially necessary domestic labor without material compensation. Women serve as a marginal labor source, to be called in as scabs during strikes, or to replace men in time of war, and to be laid off as soon as the men come back to work. But when they are on the other end, as strikers themselves, they receive the same brutal treatment given men. The real enemies of women in the economy are not men--unless they are male capitalists. In fact, without allying with working class men, working women will never have the power to change their condition. The power of the working class depends upon unity, and unity cannot occur if women believe that men, "in a male dominated economy," are their enemies, rather than capitalists, in a capitalist dominated economy.

TRADE UNIONS AND SOCIALISM

Part II: "The Struggle Against 'Economism' and 'Sectarianism'"

Outside of the Leninist movement the Left has responded to the contradiction between trade union militancy and labor's political backwardness in two divergent ways. One tendency believed that labor's lack of class consciousness would be overcome in the unions through the struggle around "economic" or "bread-and-butter demands". Lenin characterized this tendency as "Economism". In the U.S. labor movement it was known as "pure-and-simple-trade unionism."

Another tendency, attacked by Lenin as "sectarianism", saw the trade unions and "economic" struggles as the source of labor's political backwardness. The "sectarians" believed that the trade unions must be boycotted or that they must be smashed and replaced with "revolutionary" unions.

There is an element of truth in both "economism" and "sectarianism". Trade unions are a source of political backwardness and it is through the trade unions that workers will be won to socialism.

Unions are limited as "schools for socialism" in the same way they are limited as defensive, economic organizations of the working class (see Campus Spartacist Sept '70). Just as GE and Westinghouse get together to "fix" the price of lightbulbs, so electrical workers unite to "fix" the only commodity they have to sell, their labor power. As organizations which "fight purchasers of labor power over a purely commercial deal," unions in themselves are capable of producing only commercial or bourgeois consciousness. This is why in Lenin's most developed critique of "economism", What Is To Be Done, he states: "trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie."

Further, trade unions, at least in their origin, preserve all the old guild, craft and trade distinctions developed over the centuries of a market economy. Since trade unions never embrace more than a third of the work force, an immediate distinction is established between the organized, better paid and more highly skilled worker and the unorganized majority. Further distinctions exist between white collar worker and

blue collar worker, between journeyman and apprentice, between senior and young worker, between black, brown, and white worker, between men and women workers. These various sections of the labor force are set one against another in a competitive scramble to sell their labor power to a number of buyers which is always shrinking.

These distinctions are in complete variance with the increasing centralization produced by capitalism. Their preservation requires more than tradition. In addition, a stratification is produced in the working class by the bourgeoisie's conscious bribery of certain sections of labor. This leads to the creation of what Lenin calls imperialist-bribed and imperialist-corrupted "left-wing Communism" the "craft-union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, petty-bourgeois labor aristocracy, imperialist-minded, imperialist-bribed and imperialist-corrupted." It is from this social stratum that the labor bureaucracy is recruited.

The labor bureaucracy is the transmission belt for bourgeois ideology into the labor movement. However, they are "labor lieutenants of the capitalist class" in even a more profound sense. The increasing intensification of capitalist production requires increasing discipline of the producers. The task of inculcating work-discipline can no longer be left to the church, family, and other reactionary institutions. The task must be taken up by the organizations which the workers regard as their own, the unions. For these reasons, even fascism requires unions of some sort. "By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion tendencies inherent in imperialism." (Trotsky, Trade Unions in the Epoch Of Imperialist Decay)

The history of the U.S. labor movement, the history of the many militant struggles like the rise of the CIO and the post-W.W. II labor upsurge which end in political defeat, and the present state of the labor movement, is a most severe indictment of "Economism."

Whatever else may be said about trade unions, they represent, e-

'Economism' and 'Sectarianism'--cont.

specially in the absence of mass, working-class political parties, labor's only defense against capitalist exploitation and oppression. The unionized worker is probably earning double the wage made by an unorganized worker in the same trade, under better work conditions and with more job security. Trade unions represent for the working class a tremendous advance from "the disunity and helplessness of the workers to the rudiments of class organization." (Lenin, Left-Wing Comm.) Except in the most special circumstances workers retain their loyalties to their traditional class organizations, and with good reason.

The impotency, political backwardness and degeneration of unions under imperialism seems to lend support to the position of "sectarianism": That the reformist unions are obstacles to the emancipation of the working class. But "sectarianism" really means a desertion of the worker's movement, leaving the workers to their conservative leaderships, to the artificial divisions which weaken the class, and to their political backwardness. It means betraying the class struggle for the sake of cliques and rathskeller revolutionary rhetoric.

Lenin's position was that "to refuse to work in the (reactionary trade unions and) create new and artificial forms of labor organizations... is such an unpardonable blunder that it is equal to the greatest service that the Communist can render the bourgeoisie." (Left-Wing Comm) This service, as the experience of every "revolutionary," "red," and "soc-

ialist industrial" unions demonstrates, is to purge and isolate communists from the mass organizations and turn over to the union leadership, the "agents of the bourgeoisie within the working-class movement" absolute hegemony over the rank-and-file.

Winning workers to socialism is possible only within the organizations that the working class recognizes as their own. The proletarian road to power leads through and not around the unions. It is within the unions that the upcoming class battles will develop. It is there that the next generation of militants will be educated. The place for any revolutionary worthy of the name will be on the battlefield, within the unions, and next to the labor militants that every great class invariably generates.

Whether these class battles end in the political defeat, squandered militancy and demoralization of the class, or whether the battles are resolved with the victory of the proletarian revolution, a victory that will put an end to all class war, depends on the political program revolutionaries carry into the unions.

The vehicle for forging this program and carrying it into the unions must be the Leninist vanguard party. This program must be based on the Transitional Program first formulated by Trotsky. Only the Transitional Program can break through the contradiction between labor militancy and labor's political backwardness. The next article will in this series will deal with a trade union program for the 70's based on the Transitional Program.

see the next edition of Campus Spartacist for Part III:

"The Spartacist League And Trade Union Work"

Thurs. Dec. 3, Union 317 at 7:30 pm
Attend #4 in the Spartacist class series on Trotskyism--Development and Tactics of the Spartacist League.
Reading: Basic Documents of The Spartacist League; Part II, pp.18-39

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