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ERA: New Trends, New Developments

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Since the 1976 elections, important new developments have affected the character of the movement supporting the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). A new climate of struggle has been created making it possible to push the implementation of the ERA in a direction that can advance the economic and political equality intended by its initiators and supporters.

Current demands around the ERA are being placed more and more in the context of day-to-day issues facing working women. They are no longer solely on the level of accepting the ERA as a "mandate" that will bring equality by declaration. The intent of the ERA can now be defined by the new level of struggle around affirmative action. The current question before the women's movement and the working class is: How to advance equality based on mass struggle for major changes in conditions—including legislation for women in the home, on the job, and in their communities?

Full equality for women must mean full economic rights in the first place—the right to earn a living at any job one cares to pursue under safe and healthy working conditions. For women this means the right to education, training and upgrading if there is to be equal access to jobs. It means the attainment of effective pre-school care for children and for public education and health care. It means political and legal guarantees that take into account remedying past discrimination and the inequities that have accompanied it over the years. Therefore, how the ERA is to be interpreted, by whom, and under what conditions of struggle, lies at the heart of the Communist Party's approach to support for its passage. The response to new trends and the development of a new situation based upon concrete demands force the interpretation of the ERA's intent in a progressive direction. It provides the basis for legislation that can lead to equality and consequently demands a new tactical approach.

New Trends Among Working Women

For growing numbers of women, the central measuring stick of equality of women is the degree

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of equality achieved by working women and especially those entering basic industry. Approximately 23 million women work in private industry. The main trend in the employment of these women workers is the shift from traditional to non-traditional jobs, until now held almost exclusively by men. The following figures from the *1975 Handbook on Women Workers* published by the U.S. Department of Labor give a striking illustration of this.

	1960	1970
SKILLED TRADES (total)	277,000	495,000
Carpenters	3,300	11,000
Electricians	2,500	8,700
Plumbers	1,000	4,000
Auto mechanics	2,300	11,000
Painters	6,400	13,000
Tool and die makers	1,100	4,200
Machinists	6,700	11,800
Compositors & typesetters	15,500	24,000
INDUSTRY GROUPS*	1964	1974
Mining	34,000	40,000
Construction	143,000	209,000
Manufacturing	4,385,000	5,736,000
DURABLE GOODS MANUFACTURING	1,717,000	2,563,000
Fabricated metal	192,000	278,000
Machinery (not electrical)	201,000	339,000
Transportation equipment	168,000	203,000

A history of racial oppression and discrimination produces a pattern of minority women in blue-collar jobs in higher percentages (19.1 per cent) than white women (15.7 per cent), but a smaller percentage in craft jobs.

These women, Black, Brown and white working together, sharing experiences and drawing some mutual conclusions, are having a profound effect

* These figures include both production workers and other occupations.

on all other sections of women and on the whole work force. They have among their ranks a strong trend that cautions their sisters about the Equal Rights Amendment. This trend has warned that their support for the ERA will not be given without conditions. They have made it clear that women must have laws introduced that will protect them from bosses and provide them with conditions that give equal opportunity with enforcement. Many of these women have given examples of how bosses used the momentum of the ERA to take away rights in the name of "equal treatment." But the results of this so-called equality are greater exploitation and discrimination against women that is also eventually used against the men. For instance, protective labor laws wiped out recently by Title VII interpretations, guaranteed in some cases improved working conditions for men and women and were not merely "restrictive."

In steel plants, for example, there are no real lunch hours. Workers take their lunches when and where they can. In 1943, when women came into the mills, in those states that had protective labor laws mandating lunch hours for women, the companies had to provide this time. Consequently, men also benefited. Facilities such as toilet rooms, washing facilities, rest and lunch rooms had to be provided for women in some states by law. (See "Women as Steelworkers," May 1976 *Political Affairs*.) Thus, Protective labor laws therefore are restrictive when there is no struggle to see to it that they are implemented in the way best for all workers. Any laws under an exploitative, profit-oriented system such as capitalism can be used against workers if there is no struggle to prevent their abuse. Bosses attempt to eliminate these protective labor laws, using pressures of unemployment and the vague wording of the ERA to take advantage of women workers. They change job categories and qualifications for women to "equal" those of men in such a way as to place added burdens upon women workers. The same women continue to bear the main responsibility for housework and child care even while they work a 40 hour and sometimes longer work week.

In the process, many men too are eliminated from jobs, have *their* hours extended, *their* pay cut. Use of the ERA in this way is an abuse of the intentions of the growing numbers of working women and men who support its passage. It makes a mockery of what full equality for women should and must mean. It is this fear of misuse of the ERA

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that has kept millions of working class women out of the support movement for the ERA. They are concerned that the ERA will take away rights they've won in the past, and preclude winning those they need for the future.

Affirmative Action Essential to ERA

Women workers, especially oppressed minorities victimized by racist discrimination and practices, need legislation of a compensatory nature (affirmative action) to make up both for the past history of discrimination and for the double burden many bear in the home. (Forty three per cent of all married women are in the labor force.) Consequently there are legitimate fears about leaving determination of whether protective labor laws are "discriminatory" to the courts. Affirmative action measures which take into account special conditions of women can be declared illegal. These same courts must be forced to interpret the Equal Rights Amendment to strengthen and expand Affirmative Action.

Affirmative action is essential for women and makes closer ties to oppressed minorities an absolute necessity for the whole women's movement. The fight for affirmative action has reached a new stage and the need to step up its pace has become apparent to growing sections of the population. Attempts to debunk and attack affirmative action measures have awakened more and more sections of workers to protect and expand affirmative action demands because it is beneficial to all workers. This movement includes the nationally oppressed peoples, growing sections of the trade union movement, youth and women. Affirmative action needs have also convinced masses of women to fight racism and to identify more closely with the movements of Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Native American and Asian peoples.

Certain developments at the recent IWY conference in Houston were examples of a growing understanding of racism as a major source of division among women. It was first evidenced in the overwhelming reaction of support given to the comprehensive resolution on minority women presented from the floor by the minority women's caucus, as opposed to the inadequate one introduced by the leadership and appearing in the National Plan of Action. Second was the tremendous reception given the near-successful attempt to prevent the seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation claiming to

speak for Mississippi women, and including advocates of the Ku Klux Klan.

Ultra-Right

While for us these new developments represent tremendous new possibilities for real victories, monopoly and other reactionary elements are shifting their tactics toward the ERA. Monopoly uses reactionary forces to turn back the tide, to disorient and confuse. The increasing activity of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi party is also part of the picture. As long as the ERA could be left to vague interpretations and utilized to further divide workers, monopoly did not worry. But when monopoly profits are threatened these forces feel it necessary to move against the tide of women workers' demands. In this situation reactionary forces move to hold back the tide.

The ultra-Right is making the women's movement one of its special targets. This, too, creates a situation that demands new approaches. Their aim is to divert the movement by posing questions in whatever areas can be used to confuse and demobilize support. They are especially worried that current discussions and actions around affirmative action will not only strengthen the enforcement of the ERA but will win much greater support among the working class now that the issues surrounding it are being made clearer.

Possibilities for New Legal Victories

On the legal front, the Nixon courts (and the Carter administration tends to go along with them) have demonstrated their intention to limit and reverse equality for minorities and women where possible.

The original stand of the Carter Administration on the Bakke case, for example, was that it should be sent back to the California courts for reevaluation. This was based on the argument that strict quotas are not valid, although race can be taken into account. This position, essentially questioning the option of increasing the opportunities available to those who have been discriminated against, created such a public outcry in the Black community that Carter's attorney general had to retreat. Other reactionary court decisions were recent ones on abortion and on pregnancy disability.

Recently, however, there have been court decisions to the effect that different treatment of women and men based on biological and physio-

logical differences does not constitute discrimination or violation of equal protection under law. Cited as an example have been separate bathrooms and showers. This gives reason to believe that the courts *can* be moved by mass pressure and by legislative resolutions of intent to conclude that the Equal Rights Amendment does not require holding protective labor and affirmative action legislation in violation of the amendment.

Within the women's movement for equality additional developments are taking place. There now exist some extremely important organized forms of working-class women.

There is an increase in the number and militancy of rank-and-file womens' caucuses and committees, which have established themselves as permanent features of the trade unions. Many of them either publish their own bulletin or have a special womens' column in their trade union newspapers. All of them play an active role in pressuring the unions to take more realistic and concrete approaches to the special conditions and problems of women workers. Many of them have acted as a unifying force between Black and white workers by forceful stands on job conditions, safety, and affirmative action. They have been responsible for getting more women elected to union office even in those unions that have traditionally been open only to men.

The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) is an outgrowth of the rank-and-file movements. It is a formation of trade union women from various unions and industries. The fact that it unites women from several national and international unions enables women to play an even more influential and powerful role within the labor movement. CLUW, in spite of certain limitations, has helped clarify some of the basic questions that working women need acted upon in order to assure equal access to jobs and hiring. Strengthening the rank-and-file base of CLUW is an important step toward developing trade union women as leaders.

Women for Racial and Economic Equality (WREE) held its National Founding Convention in September 1977. The National Founding Convention of WREE brought nearly 600 women together. The overwhelming majority were delegates representing its membership of primarily working-class women. It included trade union as well as unorganized working women, there were housewives and unemployed, welfare recipients and

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students among its delegate members. Perhaps its most impressive feature, however, was its composition. The majority of the delegates were working women—at least half were of oppressed minorities. This organization has already made its impact felt.

At the Houston IWY Convention a leaflet distributed by WREE headlined "Support ERA—Guarantee its INTENT for FULL Equality," was enthusiastically taken. Women read the leaflets warning of the dangers of misuse of the ERA and the need for legal protections. They read of the importance of strengthening the movement by linking it to resolutions of intent that can give a legal barrier to misuse of the ERA. Many women nodded in agreement as they read and welcomed this approach as an important contribution.

One of WREE's unique features is its inclusion of a broad spectrum of political views in its membership and leadership. It is composed of independents, Democrats, Republicans, Communists, Socialists and Liberals as well as church activists of all denominations. The Women's Bill of Rights has been the main unifying factor for these women of varied backgrounds and cultures and is seen as a basis for concrete legislation that can help win full economic, political and social equality for all women, with proper enforcement. At its founding convention, it was proposed, discussed and overwhelmingly adopted to enter the campaign for the passage of the ERA, with due attention to the special interests and concerns of working women: "WREE will work to strengthen the movement for the ERA and its real meaning by clarifying the intent of the vast majority of its supporters." It was resolved that "WREE launch a campaign for resolutions and

statements of intent in states where the ERA has been passed as well as in states where it has not passed and that such statements make clear that the intent of the ERA not be construed to deny affirmative action or other legislation, past or present, which is beneficial to women."

The growth of these new organizations reinforces the concept that working-class women make the difference in struggle for basic progress. It indicates that working-class women are moving in the direction of playing a decisive role in the leadership of the women's movement. It means the ability to win large sections of women who have not yet been convinced to support the ERA because they have been fearful that it would not deliver equality and might take away gains already won. It places the struggle for the ERA in the context of the broader movement for genuine equality. It offers a strong argument against the attempts by the ultra-Right to confuse and disorient the women's movement by posing the false choice between loss of all protection for women and continued dependence and acceptance of male supremacy. It means greater ability to introduce *new* legislation that can guarantee more lasting equality by preventing the abuse or elimination of protective labor laws.

Finally the new developments in the movement for the ERA and the new trends influenced by working women, Black, Brown and white, clarify on what basis the movement for full equality for women can win victories.

These new conditions and forms of struggle for ERA can assure that its original intent is fulfilled. It enables passage of the ERA to make a contribution toward real equality for women that Communists can support.

N.Y. abortion teach-in hits Medicaid denial

NEW YORK, Feb. 2 — More than 200 people crowded into WBAI radio studios for a recent teach-in on abortion rights. The teach-in, sponsored by the National Organization for Women (NOW) New York City Chapter and broadcast live over WBAI, commemorated the fifth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that abortion is a fundamental right.

"We are here," explained Noreen Connell, President of the New York City Chapter of NOW, "to voice a strong protest to the passage of the Hyde Amendment by Congress, which denies women the right to use Medicaid funds for abortions and particularly discriminates against minority women.

"Last year 300,000 women used Medicaid funds for abortion," Connell continued. "How many of these women would now be dead or mutilated, and how many unwanted children would have been born if Medicaid funds had not been available?"

Judy Berek, Director of Legislative and Professional Programs, District 1199, National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, pointed out the ties between anti-abortion forces and anti-union forces. Berek emphasized the need for the women's movement and the labor movement to work together.

Endorse teach-in

District 1199 and District 65 (Distributive Workers of America) both endorsed the teach-in. Adrienne Critchlow of the Communications Workers of America and the Coalition of Labor Union Women, urged union women to demand that elected officials hold to their promises.

Dr. Helen Rodriguez, pediatrician and member, Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, focused on incidents of steriliza-

tion abuse across the country. She explained the importance of New York State's 30-day waiting period, designed to prevent sterilization abuses such as coercion, lack of proper counseling in a woman's own language, and sterilization without consent.

Other speakers at the teach-in included journalist Ellen Willis, author and anthropologist Evelyn Reed, Dr. Christopher Tietze of the Population Council and National Abortion Rights Action League, and anthropologist Mona Etienne.

Alice Chapman, Nation NOW Board member from Connecticut, cited the shocking statistics of child and teenage pregnancy.

"The tragedy is that more than one-third of the women seeking Medicaid abortions in Connecticut are teenagers," she said. "They are children having children, and we can't allow them to have back alley abortions."

The goal of NOW in 1978 is to repeal the Hyde Amendment and any other restrictions on women's right to choose abortion, regardless of their financial status. The speakers encouraged listeners to write to representatives, to demonstrate, to lobby, to speak out, and to get involved. The audience responded enthusiastically by volunteering to lobby in Albany and by signing petitions against the Hyde Amendment.