



battle of ideas

Revolution and Women's Liberation

It is a commonly held assumption that men are socially superior to women because they are **naturally** superior. Male supremacy, according to this myth, is not a social phenomena at a particular stage in history, but a natural law. And what is the 'proof' that women are inferior? They are mothers! Nature, it is believed, has condemned the female sex to an inferior status.

If these assumptions are correct, then the prospect for women's liberation would be grim. Yet the confidence of Marxists in the struggle to overcome women's oppression arises because we reject these 'truths' and maintain that all forms of oppression — including sexual, national, and racial oppression — spring from historic, economic and social conditions, not (in the case of women) from their biological or sexual make-up.

Of course, it can't be denied that women as a group — unlike men — have been reproducers of the species throughout history! But Marxists need to go beyond this elementary fact to assess the social meaning or value associated with reproduction. To get to the roots of the subjection of the female sex, it is necessary to examine the combination of **all** social relations in any particular period of history, including how labour is organised in the production process and how the species itself is maintained, through reproduction.

ORIGIN OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

HUMAN HISTORY can be divided into two main epochs: the food-gathering epoch, which extended over hundreds of thousands of years; and the food-producing epoch, which began with the invention of agriculture and stockbreeding some 8,000 years ago. In primitive societies, production was limited to hunting, fishing, and gathering for the immediate consumption of the community. Everyone played an arduous role in overcoming the harsh forces of nature and physically sustaining the community.

In these subsistence-based societies, a social division of labour existed: men generally hunted while women gathered wild fruits and herbs. However, although this division of labour developed along sex lines, there is no evidence to suggest that this division was oppressive to women. The social status of both women and men reflected the roles each of the sexes performed in social production and the activities of everyday life.

Increasing anthropological evidence suggests that women's contribution to these hand-to-mouth societies was not unimportant. Men



Photo: ANGELA PHILLIPS (IFL)

London women marched in defiance of McKnee's Public Order Ban to celebrate International Women's Day. And they sang and chanted all the way from Clapham Common to Brixton Community Centre. Police harassment could not prevent this annual show of sisterhood. The women chose to march illegally and refused to be classified as a 'cultural or religious festival'

which would have exempted them from the ban.

Leaflets distributed on the march reminded women that International Women's Day commemorates the strike in 1908 of 15,000 New York sweatshop garment workers — all women and all militant. The women's liberation movement still has to fight the oppression of women at home, at work and in the streets.

were just as likely as not to return empty-handed, because hunting could not be relied upon to regularly provide the community's food. Equally, the care of young members of the community did not fall upon women within individual family units — as the family has evolved today — but was borne by the community as a whole, with its social division of labour.

As productive forces in society

developed — with the invention of improved implements, for example — a small surplus of goods was created above and beyond the immediate needs of the community. But it was the agricultural revolution which made possible a qualitative change in society. With the domestication of plants, food became more abundant, and new productive forces were released. The former division of labour between the sexes was

displaced by a new series of social divisions of labour, and a specialisation of jobs was possible now that some people were freed from food gathering.

The emergence of this surplus presented the possibility of exchange, together with the private appropriation of the social surplus. Although this transition in society was complex and extremely uneven, the developing societies rapidly became stratified.

Those who came to privately control the society's surplus laid the basis for the emergence of classes with fundamentally different interests. For the first time social inequality appeared.

The new division of labour and the changing relationship between men and women to the process of production for exchange created conditions for men to dominate, both in the seizure of the surplus and in the class of the owners of this surplus. Why did men as a group have this favourable relation to the social surplus? This question is a point of continuing debate among anthropologists and within the women's liberation movement.

Whatever the reasons, it is clear that with the development of private property — and the emergence of a state to defend it — the value of women's role as reproducers of future generations assumed quite a different character.

New family forms grew up: patriarchal family forms with men at the head, so that the paternity of children could be guaranteed and private property passed on to the new generation. Women themselves — like cattle — became valuable objects for exchange. They, too, were a source of wealth, who could produce new human beings with potential labour to be exploited. It was at this point — with the emergence of the patriarchal family in class society — that women became increasingly defined by their reproduction capacities, rather than their role in social production.

In the classical Marxist work which explains the origins of women's oppression — **The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State** — Frederick Engels is careful to argue against any notion of men and women as antagonistic classes. In rooting women's oppression in the family forms which developed with the passage from pre-class to class society, Engels points out, however, that 'the first class antagonism coincides with the development of antagonisms of man and woman in the monogamous marriage'.

There has been much debate about this work. Some critics feel that Engel's sources were inadequate given the low level of anthropological knowledge and data when he was writing. Others challenge the conclusions he draws from the data. Whatever the assessment of Engels' contribution on these points, it is his method which remains an important acquisition for Marxists.

This historical and materialist method enables us to scientifically analyse women's oppression and to derive a strategy for women's liberation. We can't tackle the subjugation women have suffered for centuries on the basis of subjective

wishes or hopes. It needs hard analysis which comes to terms with how male-female relations in reproduction combine with the total set of social relations — including the dominant relations of production — in society.

It isn't an easy task. It means we need to examine these relations historically, from preclass through the slave, feudal and capitalist forms of class society. Furthermore we need to see why women still remain oppressed and subjugated by the East European and Soviet bureaucracies, even after capitalist relations have been overthrown.

WOMEN'S OPPRESSION UNDER CAPITALISM

WOMEN'S ROLE in the many different family forms that have existed throughout class society has served the interests of the ruling class. In our society, the capitalism of advanced industrial countries, the nuclear monogamous family is the unit that maintains and determines the specific character of women's oppression. The mother-father-children set up we are all familiar with is a far cry from the communal kinship structures of primitive societies or even the slave family — with slave-owner, wife and all the slaves as one basic social and economic unit.

The family plays many important functions for the ruling class today. It is no longer the unit for economic production it was in the early days of capitalism, when all members of the family worked at home weaving cloth, making chains, and so on. But it still has a vital economic role.

The family of the propertyless classes, today reproduces future workers for capitalism. This small unit, on its own, is responsible for the over-all well-being of both today's workers and those of the future. And it produces workers to suit the system. The family system is a repressive and conservative institution that reproduces within itself the hierarchical, authoritarian relations necessary to the maintenance of class society as a whole. It fosters the possessive, competitive, and aggressive attitudes which are necessary to perpetuate class divisions.

The bourgeoisie and even sections of the petit bourgeoisie also defend the family for it is the mechanism through which their private property can be passed on.

Because women's 'natural' place is supposed to be in the family, this enables the ruling class to maintain a reserve pool of low-paid, little-skilled, and dispensable labour which is vital to the irrational fluctuations of the economy. Women are relied on to take employment in sectors which are extensions of their role in the family, such as caring, teaching, cleaning, restaurants.

The family as a unit is also a consumer for the myriad of products produced under capitalism for profit. A glance at any modern advertising material indicates that this potential market is a major target for the promotion experts — whether it be cosmetics to catch a husband, spray polish to brighten the family home, or anti-depressants to make its isolation bearable.

Of course, the inequalities in this situation are hidden, and the Church and the media are determined to see they remain that way. Just as the state appears to be neutral, women's life-long sacrifice to children, husbands, and the elderly is made to seem 'natural'. The equality and democracy that appear to exist are systematised and promoted by the bourgeoisie, thus obscuring the nature of relationships in class society.

The family, in reproducing this ideology, further denegrates women. For example, women's sexual desires and expression hardly exist — if the dominant notions in society are to be believed. She is seen to have sexual relations only to fulfill her 'natural' instinct as a child bearer.

And even if sexual relations for women aren't so directly linked to procreation, the role of women is reduced to giving pleasure to men. Lesbianism doesn't fit into this schema — so it is labelled as 'unnatural', and 'perverted'.

This ideology does more than simply 'keep women in their place'. It weakens the working class as a whole by strengthening divisions which

already exist and opening up new ones. Insofar as women are exclusively the organisers of family life, their isolation in the home can lead them to pressure the 'breadwinner' from rocking the boat at work, because of the extra burdens such actions will place in managing household affairs. In the long term industrial action might pay off, but it doesn't substitute for cash in the hand for the family's food and clothing.

And it's not a long step between women seeing their interests as separate from those of the breadwinner to both men and women putting the private concerns of family life ahead of the collective interests of the working class.

The daily struggle of the working class in a time of crisis like today suffers from these notions. If the working class accepts the idea that women belong in the home, it's not difficult to understand why men and often women see women's jobs,

needs and demands of the mass of the people.

The maintenance of capitalist relations depends in important ways on the continuing oppression of women. Nevertheless the destruction of these capitalist relations is not an end in itself — it simply removes the major barrier to the achievement of our longer term goal; the liberation of humanity from all forms of oppression: economic, sexual, cultural, and social.

A precondition for women's liberation is the replacement of class society by collective and planned control of all forms of production. Women's liberation won't automatically come about when the private ownership of the means of production is transferred to the working class as a whole. To begin with the productive forces will need to be totally redirected and planned. This way, they will be channelled to fulfill the needs of the mass of people, including

This means we need to be clear about the nature of the state we are presently up against. That the state defends capitalist relations is a point on which all revolutionaries can agree. But the economism and syndicalism of the British left has tended to reduce capitalism to the economic relations at the point of production.

Capitalism is a complex system of social, political, and economic relations. The state defends all these in the interest of capital by regulating and controlling every aspect of our existence — from supervising family life and stepping in with the 'welfare state' if the family fails to deliver 'the goods', to its more forthright intervention in the economy in rescuing ailing firms or using police force against pickets, or state intervention into sexual relations of homosexuals. This is the scope of bourgeois domination revolutionaries are out to destroy, and it is against the power of the state that demands for women's liberation need to be posed.

It's obvious that one sector of oppressed people or even workers on their own can't successfully challenge this formidable political adversary. The working class — an essential, but by no means only, component of the struggle for state power — must aim to unite all the oppressed and exploited in society. Every step along the way from today's struggles through the establishment of organs of dual power, to the final overthrow of the capitalist state, the working class must lead an independent struggle for a system of demands, or a programme, which can generate the unity that is vital.

Demands for the liberation of women can't therefore be separated from the political concerns of the class struggle. In place of ahistoric, ultimatic demands to abolish the family, demands should be pursued for the state to take social responsibility, under our control, for tasks carried out today by women in the individual family unit. The family won't disappear by dicta!

It will wither away only when society as a whole assumes its collective responsibility for every member of the community. That is a central task for socialism. Placing these demands now on the capitalist state takes forward the struggle, as Lenin explained in relation to divorce: 'Marxists know that democracy does not abolish class oppression. It only makes the class struggle more direct, wider, more open and pronounced and that is what we need. The fuller the freedom of divorce, the clearer will women see that the source of their 'Domestic slavery' is capitalism not lack of rights. The more democratic the system of government, the clearer will the workers see that the root evil is capitalism, not lack of rights.'

'Divorce' in this quotation can be replaced with 'childcare', 'a woman's right to choose on childbirth', 'equal pay' and other demands of the women's movement.

In place of demands for the creation of new lifestyles independent of political and working class struggle, as radical feminists raise, revolutionaries fight to transform the daily concerns of women into a challenge against bourgeois state control over them. This isn't easy, especially with issues like rape and women battering. But with these questions, as well, it is a determination to challenge and weaken the bourgeois state, combined with a firm commitment to women's liberation, which underlies a revolutionary approach.

For all these reasons, although it may appear a bit contradictory on the surface, revolutionaries demand; the democratic right to civil not Church marriage in Spain; resist the breaking up of Asian families through the immigration laws of the British state; and oppose sterilisation when it is imposed by the state — as it is on Black women in Britain.

Revolutionaries in Britain have been slow to understand the centrality of women's liberation. What we have had to overcome is the legacy — and the reality today — of both social democracy and stalinism. Social democracy has traditionally insisted that the unions will take care of economic matters, and Parliament will solve all political and social questions. The Labour Party scrupulously avoids what it deems are 'personal matters' — like abortion

rights, which it was only forced to take up when feminists built a movement that could no longer be ignored.

When social democracy does take up social questions in which the women's movement is concerned, such as child care provision, it offers utterly reformist perspectives to simply 'patch up' the system rather than transforming it. And it has sought to achieve these more often than not through backroom wheeling and dealings with local authorities rather than mobilising the mass of women. But even in these cases, the economism of the British left blinkered its orientation to these struggles, and in ignoring them, the political initiative was left in the hands of reformists.

The reformists try to pose as defenders of women's rights — but ignore the material roots of women's oppression. They have been much more interested in changing attitudes



Staff at the Royal Russell School at Croydon who refused to leave their union — the GMWU — didn't get the pay increases given other members of the staff. The strikers have been in dispute since 3 March. Support to GMWU office, 205 Hook Road, Chessington, Surrey.

wages, and welfare needs as 'luxuries' to be dispensed with. It is this kind of weakness in the working class that the bourgeoisie is only too happy to encourage.

THE STRUGGLE FOR STATE POWER

AS REVOLUTIONARY socialists, we are striving to achieve the liberation of human life from all forms of oppression and exploitation that have festered and flourished since the dawning of class society. Unlike primitive and pre-class societies, the productive forces of today's society — and the technical, scientific and cultural capacities of its members — have the potential for the mass of the people to exercise collective control over all aspects of daily life.

This potential for human liberation is blocked at every turn by a social system in which the production and reproduction of life is determined by the drive to accumulate and appropriate capital, and not by the

women.

The possibilities of women gaining independence and confidence are enormous in a society which develops its productive forces so that inequality is eradicated. Safe and effective birth control; mechanisms to eliminate the relevance of all historically evolved differences in strength; socialised childcare, laundry, and restaurants, will all become possible.

Whether they are realised, depends upon the conscious efforts of the autonomous women's movement — vitally necessary even after the seizure of state power — in tackling not only the material basis of women's oppression but also the ideological baggage of capitalist societies which will stubbornly persist.

Unless we recognise now that an integral part of the transformation of society is the transfer of social and economic functions borne by the individual family unit to society as a whole, the prospects for women's liberation will recede well into the distant future even after the working class has seized state power.

The socialist is rel

The socialist current in the women's liberation movement is reborn. This was affirmed at the thousand-strong Socialist Feminist Conference in January, at which women from the International Marxist Group participated. We were impressed by its size and the positive, supportive atmosphere.

Thinking back to the national socialist current conferences before they collapsed in 1975, we were struck by the different flavour and content of discussion. This set us thinking — why the difference? What has changed in the socialist current? Is it a positive or negative change?

Since the earliest days of the women's liberation movement, there has been a debate about the links between the battle for women's liberation and the struggle against capitalism. Activists during the late 60s applied the tools of Marxism to these discussions, sharpened by debates in the student movement and the 'new left'.

As working class struggles gathered steam in the early 70s, the WLM responded with solidarity action. And as well as discussions on the nature of domestic labour and the family in capitalist society, there was lively debate on the links between the WLM and the organised struggles of the working class — particularly working class women.

Labour was returned to office in 1974. And women had new problems to face. Promises of equality and independence evaporated. Attacks on living standards placed even greater responsibilities on women in the family. The toothless Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination laws didn't live up to Labour's promises, and the Government failed to lift a finger in defence of women's abortion rights against reactionary attacks.

In response the WLM vigorously campaigned on its six demands. The National Abortion Campaign, the Working Women's Charter, and actions around such issues as nurseries, rape and battered women grew stronger. Through their experience of struggle, more and more women new to the ideas of the WLM saw the need to fundamentally change society by challenging women's oppression and the class society which perpetuates it.

But these changes don't come easily. The movement was up against basic problems: the strength and political power vested in the State; the collaboration of union and labour leaders; the labour movement itself, which dismisses the plight of women experienced beyond their economic conditions at work; the inadequate perspectives for liberation offered by sections of the socialist movement.

Discussion and analysis of the

in society. The toothless measures of the Sex Discrimination Act bear this out.

Stalinism has posed an equally serious problem. When the women's movement emerged, the policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain was to defend the nuclear family as a basic unit in socialist society. The CP maintained that the family was a working class stronghold, which could be a haven from the pressures of the class struggle.

These policies first appeared in the working class as the process of stalinist degeneration set in in the Soviet Union. The bureaucracy reinforced the family for many of the same reasons it is maintained by capitalist society — as a means of inculcating attitudes of submission to authority and perpetuating the privileges of a minority. And so the gains made by women in the 1917 revolution in the Soviet Union were rolled back. Bolshevik policies which

promoted free, legal abortion, maternity benefits, communal houses, public eating places, central laundries, nurseries and other measures to liberate women from the burdens of domestic labour were discarded.

The rehabilitation of the family in the Soviet Union began in the '30s: abortions were abolished in 1936; illegitimacy reappeared; wedding rights and marriage ceremonies were again instituted; homosexuality was made a criminal offence in 1934; and non-reproductive sexuality came to be seen as a deviation from socialist reconstruction. Women in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe remain oppressed today. They are still responsible for domestic labour in individual family units. According to an official Soviet census in 1970, 90 per cent of all urban women between the ages of 16 and 54 hold jobs outside the home. Yet the average Soviet woman spends four to seven hours a day on housework, in addition to eight hours on an outside job. An important component of the political revolution needed to overthrow the bureaucracy will thus be women fighting to end the double day of work and all other vestiges of their oppression.

The emergence of the women's movement in Britain has made an impact on the crisis-ridden Communist Party. The CP, unlike the Labour Party, officially recognises the existence of the women's liberation movement. But the policies of the CP cannot change in any fundamental way while it remains tied to the interests of the bureaucracy in the USSR. And to date, on the vital question of the need to destroy the bourgeois state, which seeks to reinforce the family, the CP has miserably failed.

It not only argues mistakenly that the bourgeois state can be transformed, but like the Labour Party has been totally unable to address itself to the material roots of women's oppression in the family. The CP has become almost exclusively concerned with changes in attitude and personal relations in the family.

With the failure of the main organisations of the working class to champion women's liberation, it is not surprising that many of the women who began to organise against their oppression in the late '60s did so partly as a response to the inadequacies of the left. Even today, the economism persists. Some sects still dismiss the women's movement as petit bourgeois. And the Socialist Workers Party, although it now recognises the need for a broad women's movement, insists it be tied to their party through Women's Voice groups. Thus the 'Women's Voice movement' is projected as a parallel one to the women's movement under the control of the SWP.

From the women's liberation movement comes quite different strategies. The movement appeared in the militant days of struggle in the late '60s. Hundreds of women's liberation groups were formed across the country; including groups for study, self-help, consciousness raising, and campaigning. The new wave of actions unleashed by women demanding their liberation followed an important equal pay strike at Fords in Dagenham, and of the campaigning activity by the National Joint Action Council for Women's Equal Rights, which had similarities with today's Working Women's Charter Campaign.

The scope of actions taken by women for their rights at work made it clear that the new consciousness among women was not about to disappear overnight. Working class women were influenced by the militant upsurge of the '60s and they, too, through their unions and other working class organisations, demanded their rights as women.

It was on the question of how to make this challenge effective and how to take the feminist struggle forward that differences have emerged in the movement. For 'radical feminists', women and men make up two antagonistic classes. Women's oppression arises thanks to attempts by the dominating male class to maintain patriarchal and sexist relations. In other words, as long as men have existed, so too has the subjugation of women.

The common feature of all radical

feminists is that they analyse women's oppression as separate from other class relations in society. The struggle for socialism has no place in their strategy, and their concern for unity among all women leads them to see changes in lifestyle as a perspective for struggle, over and above alliances with the working class and other oppressed groups who are also seeking to eradicate capitalist society.

The strategy offered by radical feminists rests on the assumption that women share identical interests, whatever their class. It's not surprising, therefore, that the more extreme wing of this current advocates a separate life from men as the route to liberation.

A critique of radical feminism has emerged within the women's movement itself, from the socialist feminist current. Feminists in this current are equally concerned to rescue the Marxist method and

different from those of the radical feminists: patriarchal relations once again become a parallel form of oppressive relations, independent of the class struggle.

The danger in this kind of approach is that it fails to look at the plight of women historically, to see the specific form oppression takes in each epoch. It's a bit too easy just to put women's oppression down to male domination! And when psychoanalytical concepts are used to scientifically explain women's oppression, it often comes back to the familiar idea that it exists thanks to women's biological makeup or their innate psychological drives.

If women's struggle is regarded as parallel to the class struggle — and not a central part of it — then it's not going too much further to see the movement as politically autonomous from the struggle. Thus there is the idea that a separate political organisation is necessary — beyond

influenced by the ideas promoted by the ruling class which see women primarily as mothers and wives. The bureaucracy of the labour movement is quite content to keep things this way.

Sexist divisions weaken the working class not only in its efforts to confront the bosses, but they can also help reinforce the privileges enjoyed by the bureaucracy itself. The undemocratic nature of the workers' movement makes it difficult to turn the tide within the unions.

In preparation for a superior form of democracy in socialist society, as well as to advance women's struggles, an important part of the fight for working class democracy is the right of women to organise independently of the bureaucracy and discuss apart from male workers who hold sexist ideas. This helps women to gain confidence and force the union leaderships to represent their interests.

These problems won't disappear automatically as the struggle develops. Even when the working class has established its own democratic organs of power which challenge those of the bourgeoisie, the material basis of women's oppression and the ideas to sustain it will persist. After the overthrow of capitalism choices will still have to be made about where resources are allocated. The autonomous women's movement will prove vital in ensuring that the needs of women are not swept aside.

With today's advances in the productive forces and a new level of feminist consciousness that go well beyond what was possible in the Soviet Union in 1917, revolutionaries are better equipped to confront the inequities suffered by women in every aspect of their existence. For example, the Bolsheviks generally accepted a sexual division of labour which continued to assign women to staffing the child care centres and collective laundries. Thanks to the challenge raised by the women's movement today, these tasks are no longer automatically regarded as the 'natural' duty of women.

The ways women organise now — and during the transition to socialism — will vary immensely. Autonomous organisation will involve campaigns, caucuses in the unions, consciousness raising groups, and so on. Not all of these groups exclude men. Indeed, the organisation of mixed campaigns and actions on 'women's issues' are an important indication of our commitment to seek unity with everyone prepared to join in the class struggle in a way which integrates the fight for women's liberation. But whatever the form this might take, it is up to women to take the leadership in the fight for their liberation.

The commitment of revolutionaries to the autonomous movement isn't something we agree with today, but may dismiss tomorrow. Unlike economic currents on the left, we don't condemn the movement as an irrelevant petit bourgeois formation because of its 'middle class' activists. Rather than a simple tactical orientation, our commitment stems from the contribution we see the movement making in confronting the bourgeois state and in reaching our common political goal of universal liberation.

A SOCIALIST STRATEGY FOR THE WLM

ALTHOUGH revolutionary socialists seek to build the broadest possible movement of women — recognising that women as a sex are oppressed by class society — we can't brush aside the effects of class division.

Sexism is experienced in qualitatively different ways by different classes of women. It is possible for women of the ruling class to alleviate the privatised nature of domestic labour, for example, by employing maids, sending children to public schools, or investing in labour-saving devices. And they are quite able to control their fertility by a visit to the private clinics of Harley Street.

That's not to suggest that these women won't be drawn to the ranks of the women's movement. In Britain it hasn't occurred yet, but as feminist ideas penetrate deeper it could. But once the struggle for women's liberation begins to challenge the very foundations of class society, these women will have to choose between

st current boom!

fundamental problems of strategy confronted in the movement's activity was needed. From this, the socialist feminist network was set up at the 1976 WLM conference. **Scarlet Woman**, the socialist feminist newsletter, and regional conferences and workshops were organised.

What was different about January's conference of the socialist current in Manchester?

Most of the women at the conference hoped a discussion on socialism and feminism would provide some answers to the problems confronting them in struggle. In contrast, earlier socialist feminist discussions were largely attempts by Marxists in the WLM to apply their analysis to the movement's debates.

The reborn socialist current has grown out of developments in the WLM itself. Its links with the WLM places it in a good position to spread its ideas about a socialist strategy for women's liberation to the whole movement.

The present debates start from a criticism of sections of the socialist movement which reduce the struggle for women's liberation to the narrow confines of the economic struggle of working class women at the workplace.

However, the basis of agreement within the current is at a very elementary level. The importance of a class struggle against capitalism is recognised. But, its relationship to the battle for women's liberation is far from clear.

The meaning of 'socialist feminism' remains undefined. For some women it is an alternative to the political strategies offered by the revolutionary left, involving radically new demands and actions, even to the exclusion of women from left groups.

For others, the renewed confidence and strength of the socialist current offers good possibilities for the movement as a whole to develop clear links with an anti-capitalist struggle. Through its influence on the labour and socialist movements, these women feel that the WLM can ensure its struggles are fully integrated.

This debate was raised but inadequately developed during the socialist feminist conference. Most recognised this failing. The debate on theory and strategy will continue therefore through the **Scarlet Woman** journal and another national conference, after a further year of local and regional discussion.

The lessons to be learned from this welcome debate are relevant to the discussion agitating the whole socialist movement. Revolutionary organisations cannot be content to comment from the sidelines. They have a responsibility to contribute to and learn from these debates.



Photo: ABDUL CHOWDRY

Detail from hessian-mounted collage created by Margaret Harrison from the 'Women at Work' exhibition now on at Battersea Arts Centre, Lavender Hill, SW11. Harrison's montage exposes the plight of women homeworkers. See 'What's Left' on page 10 for further details.

socialist politics from workerist perspectives. The first debate organised by socialist feminists concerned domestic labour. It is in this area of analysis, especially on the related, ideological aspects of women's oppression, which Marxists have been weakest on.

Through these debates, Marxists will be able to arrive at a more enriched understanding of the oppression of women. What are the ways, for example, in which society uses social, cultural, and psychological mechanisms in advanced bourgeois democracies to perpetuate women's oppression? Many critics of Marxism have turned to Freud's theories of psychoanalysis to investigate this question. Problems have arisen when psychoanalytical concepts are used to explain, rather than simply describe, the nature of women's oppression.

Very often these debates have started from the assumption that patriarchy — male-dominated family forms — existed before class society. The conclusions drawn are not so

the social movement for women's liberation — to eradicate sexual oppression of women by men.

This is a dangerous perspective. If the movement were transformed into a political party which saw its purpose as being separate from the class struggle, it would be weakened and incapable of becoming broadly based and united, ready to forge unity with other social and political forces — involving both men and women.

THE AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

'AUTONOMY' MEANS self-government. In other words, it is women who need to take control and leadership in their struggle for liberation. Support for the autonomous women's movement — whether it be the right of women to meet in women's only groups or for action groups such as the National Abortion Campaign — is a vital part of the revolutionary programme. Today, the workers' movement remains

the dominant class relations from which they benefit, and the struggles being led by women to put an end to the class and its state which oppresses them.

These women will join the movement on the basis of agreement with its six demands, along with a lot of other women who hold a wide range of political views. Should revolutionaries support the unity of the movement, or simply be satisfied with becoming active in the socialist current? In our view, to join with only self-professed socialists would weaken the movement as a whole. If the socialist current separated from the WLM tomorrow — and this is the logic if one argues that the rest of the movement should be ignored — much of its energy, solidarity and imagination would dissipate.

The unity of the movement today around demands which take the struggle for women's liberation forward can lay the basis for a confident fighting and immensely larger movement tomorrow. Many issues, such as rape, first taken up by radical feminists, have had enormous impact in society. And although serious criticisms can be made of the strategy put forward on the issue of rape, any differences can be better resolved within a common movement. This is especially the case when the movement is in ferment and clear political alternatives have not yet crystallised.

Agreement on the six demands of the WLM does not necessarily give the movement an anti-capitalism dynamic. But insofar as it was born in the midst of the youth radicalisation of the late '60s — with its challenges to hierarchy, authority, bureaucratic attitudes, and the distortions society imposes on all forms of daily life — we can at least say it has a disposition to develop with this dynamic.

As the class struggle develops, this will be mirrored in the women's movement itself. And in the fight for unity in action with other anti-capitalist forces — men and women; through debate and clarification on a strategy for liberation, the socialist current of the women's movement can help win the broadest forces within the movement to a socialist strategy.

This will strengthen and bring more forces into broader anti-capitalist struggles. This lays the basis for raising demands for the needs of women in these broader struggles — such as those against racism and fascism, against the Grunwick bosses, and so on. This is the best way to ensure the ideas of the women's movement are spread far and wide.

Revolutionaries have an important role both within the socialist current and the broader movement. By arguing for our programme of action independent of the ruling class and its state, revolutionaries seek to win activists to our ideas. It is through the active struggles waged by the movement that the different strategies will be tested. This will force the petit bourgeois or bourgeois forces in the movement to choose whether to link up with the working class as the only means of achieving liberation.

However broad we may try to build the WLM, we can't pin our present hopes on numerically increasing the involvement of working class women in local groups. When working class women begin to challenge their oppression, they often see the unions, tenants' associations, community groups, or even the Labour Party as their terrain of struggle. For these women, there often is not an immediate identification with the WLM which sharply challenges women's 'natural' role in the family.

We need to take the ideas of the women's movement into all working class organisations. In addition to women organising independently within these bodies — for example, in women's caucuses — working class women have been drawn to many activities: single issue campaigns, campaigns launched (however inadequately) by the leadership of mass organisations, and one-off local meetings and conferences organised by WLM groups.

Women new to the ideas of the women's movement are beginning to act. And the WLM has a special responsibility to ensure that through debates, pamphlets, and books, the links between these specific issues and wider questions of women's oppression are drawn. This is a

responsibility which the WLM has not lived up to in many cases. We need only look at the activities planned for International Women's Day in London this month to see how parts of the WLM failed to approach many women who might not fully understand, or agree immediately with, the full six demands of the movement. Yet many of these women are fighting hard battles against injustices they face because of their sex.

Whatever the form this broad radicalisation may take, the WLM needs to maintain — and even step up — its independent activity. A fighting force of women determined to put an end to the oppressive family which class society has forced on them can only give a spur to women struggling

around specific issues in the labour movement or in united front campaigns such as the National Abortion Campaign.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY AND THE WLM

THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY has quite a different role than the WLM. The WLM is a social movement which seeks to eradicate sexual, cultural, social and economic oppression faced by women. This entails confronting the state, so the movement cannot remain politically autonomous from the class struggle. Ultimate success requires unity with every force out to end the power of the bourgeois state.

But to say that the women's

movement has a political link with the class struggle and should not ignore it, is quite different from arguing it should therefore be organisationally tied to political parties, trade unions or any other body which appears to share some or all of its aims. Any successful effort to take over the women's movement organisationally would disastrously weaken the struggle for liberation — even if the movement agreed! The way revolutionaries can best influence the WLM is by arguing for the democratic right to present their ideas to the movement, and through debate and activity, winning women to them.

The party can't substitute itself for the WLM. It has a very limited and specific role: to synthesise the experiences of struggle into a

programme of action and demands capable of unleashing a battle against the right of the bourgeoisie to dominate and control all areas of life. The party fights for its programme within all movements and struggles to aid them in recognising the nature of bourgeois domination and to win them to the need to challenge capitalist relations and ultimately to seize state power.

The party is united around one fundamental agreement — that is its political programme. On a wide range of questions of theory, history, aesthetics, philosophy, etc, the revolutionary party takes no line. Policies taken by the revolutionary party, on the contrary, relate to one limited concern — how to get from today's struggle to the seizure of state power.

On a whole range of questions revolutionaries consciously do not adopt a political line. Furthermore, even where revolutionaries agree on a line, it doesn't mean they have all the answers! What we do have is a method of approaching the struggle and an overall strategic framework which links present struggles with the seizure of state power. Through our organisation we are able to synthesise many years of experience of struggle of all our militants, and can share our assessment and policies on a wide range of issues which the WLM is beginning to take up — like the anti-imperialist struggles, racism, and so on.

Because the IMG is the only group on the far left which is part of a revolutionary international, with sections in over 60 countries, we also have the benefits and experiences of struggles in which our comrades, all over the world have engaged in. It is the responsibility of revolutionaries, therefore, to ensure that perspectives adopted by the women's movement don't cut across the needs of other sections of society either in Britain or internationally.

This has happened. It is only necessary to recall the support which some feminists first gave to the Peace People in Ireland or the lack of sensitivity in the rape actions to the racist witchhunts launched by the state against the so-called black muggers.

The relationship between members of a revolutionary organisation and the WLM isn't a one-way process. The development of the revolutionary programme is not drawn from the air or from 'holy texts'. It is drawn from the most advanced experiences of struggle and debate in movements like the WLM. The involvement of women members of a party in the WLM not only gives them individual confidence, but by bringing their experiences back to the organisation, it strengthens the party itself.

The fact that we are scheduled to discuss at the IMG conference this year such a wide range of aspects of women's oppression and activities is in many ways attributable to a decade of struggle and debate in the WLM.

For revolutionaries, a commitment to the class struggle and to the autonomous women's movement is inextricably linked. Actively participating in the WLM is quite compatible with membership in a revolutionary organisation as long as the organisation recognises the centrality of the struggle against women's oppression. We would be fooling ourselves, however, if we maintained that the revolutionary party was able to escape the pressures of the society in which we live. These pressures will exist even after class relations are overturned! This doesn't mean we can rest easy, and put off confronting them until 'after the revolution'.

The positive lessons of the WLM can only aid the organisation's method of work and its programme. And the more action taken by the party in support of struggles launched by women, the more conscious all of its militants will become in their conduct and approach to these questions. Every effort must be made by the revolutionary organisation to consciously overcome sexist practices. Steps that are taken in this direction should not be hidden because unthinking, backward behaviour not only degrades women, but also weakens the credibility of the ideas of the organisation as a whole.



Photo: ANGELA PHILLIPS (IFL)

'Police protect pornography', chanted women marching in London to celebrate International Women's Day. When women began to put 'This exploits women' stickers on the sexist Jaffa orange squash hoarding, police moved in to

protect this degrading image of women.

The marchers refused to leave, and the police were forced to abandon their blatant defence.

An invitation from the International Marxist Group

AT THE PRESENT time there is a wide-ranging debate within the revolutionary left on both its political perspectives and the way to build a new, unified revolutionary organisation. Much of the debate has appeared in the columns of *Socialist Challenge*.

This supplement on women's liberation by the International Marxist Group is a further contribution to this discussion.

The IMG considers that the issues being discussed at its national

conference in April will be of interest to many on the revolutionary left. For that reason we have invited other organisations and individuals to participate in our conference.

Prior to the conference, three series of regional meetings of IMG members are being organised. The final series of pre-conference aggregates will take place on the weekend of 1 and 2 April.

The following groups and individuals are invited to attend: Big Flame, Workers League, International Socialist Alliance, Libertarian Communist Group and

Socialist Challenge supporters.

The aggregates will be discussing two items: tactics in the trade unions, and the next steps in building a unified revolutionary party. Regional meetings will be taking place in the following cities: London, Glasgow, Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, Newcastle, Cardiff, and Oxford.

If you would like to attend either the aggregates or the conference then write to: IMG, PO Box 50, London N1 2XP. Please state if you are in one of the organisations mentioned.