

# Wages For Housework: The Strategy for Women's Liberation

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Many "feminist" writers have contributed to the ideology of housework. Radical-feminists, while recognizing the identification of housework with our female nature, have proposed sharing this work with a man and leaving the home for outside work. Socialist-feminists, describing housework as precapitalist, have proclaimed that our goal should be toward "industrialization," which would liberate our time for more work—but in a factory, if not a collective kitchen. Liberal feminists have defined our problem as "lack of consciousness," describing women as dupes of Madison Avenue ad-men. Finally, there are those feminists who, much to capitalists' rejoicing, have glorified our forced labor in the home as the embodiment of the best human potentials: our capacity to nurture and care, our very capacity to love. One thing they all agree on is that women should not be paid for this work, because this presumably would institutionalize us in the home, and extend the control of the state to "the one area of freedom we have in our lives."

Contrary to these criticisms, the Wages for Housework Committee's perspective is based on the fact that housework is *already controlled and institutionalized* (Mother's Day is nothing less than the celebration of this institutionalization!) *precisely because this work is unwaged*. Society is organized to force us into this job, and the fact that we don't receive a wage for the work continuously undermines our power to refuse it.

That housework is unwaged means first of all that it appears not as *work*, but as part of our female nature. Thus, when we refuse part of this work—as, for example, lesbian women do in refusing to provide sexual services to men—we are branded as perverts, as if we were breaking some law of nature. We are divided into "good" and "bad" women depending on whether or not we do the housework and whether or not we do it for free. In this society to be a good woman—or just to be a woman—is to be a good servant at everyone's disposal 24 hours a day; it means accepting that this work should not be paid because it supposedly fulfills our nature, and thus contains its own reward.

Housework is not just washing dishes, scrubbing floors, or raising babies. What we do at

home is *produce and reproduce workers*: every day we create and restore the capacity of others (and ourselves) to work, and to be exploited. It is ironic that as houseworkers we are not included in the nation's labor force, for without this work the workforce would not exist. The lack of a wage obscures the indispensability of our work to the functioning of this society. Housework makes every other work possible. No car could be produced, no coal could be dug, no office could be run, if there were not women at home servicing and reproducing those who make the cars, those who dig the coal, those who run the offices. *This is the sexual division of labor*: workers make cars, and women make the workers who make the cars. And to make a worker is a much more time- and energy-consuming job than to make a car! Not only do we "reproduce" them physically—cooking their dinners, doing the shopping (shopping is *work*, not consumption as some "feminists" would have us believe). We also service workers emotionally—taking the brunt of their tiredness and frustration day after day. And we service workers sexually—the Saturday-night screw keeps them going for yet another week at the assembly line or desk.

It appears that we freely donate all this work to our husbands and children out of our love for them. In reality we are working for the same bosses, who are getting two workers for the price of one. Our lives are governed by the same work schedule as those we serve. When we cook dinner or when we "make love" is determined by the factory time-clock. Not only the quantity, but also the quality of workers we reproduce is controlled. If they don't need many workers, we are sterilized; if they need more workers we are denied access to contraceptives and are forced to resort to backstreet butchers (the right to life is never claimed for women). Likewise, if we are on welfare or we tend to produce "troublemakers," we are again sterilized.

In every case, our sexuality is continuously under control to make sure that we use it productively. Lesbianism and teenage sex are illegal, and rape in the family (or the battered wife) is not a crime since readily available sexual service is part of our job. It is the lack of

money of our own that creates the battered wife or the closet lesbian and forces so many of us to remain in unwanted family situations. With money in our hands, we would have the power to walk out whenever we wanted. Men would certainly think twice before raising their hands to us if they knew that we could leave any minute, without the prospect of starving.

Our wageless condition in the home is the material basis of our dependence on men. This weakness in the community, as wageless houseworkers, is ultimately the weakness of the entire class. Capitalism takes away from us in the community (through inflation—price hikes, rent increases, fare increases, etc.) what we have gained through our power in the factory. Women pay a double price for this defeat. Higher prices mean an intensification of our work, since we are expected to absorb the cost of inflation with extra work.

The struggle for wages for housework is a struggle for social power—for women first, but ultimately for the entire working class. In fact, by demanding wages for the work we already do, instead of demanding more work, we are posing the question of *the immediate reappropriation of the wealth we have produced*. Exploitation is the enforcement of unpaid labor, the only source of capitalist profits. Thus, to attack our wagelessness is to attack capitalism at its roots, for capital is precisely the accumulated labor that has been robbed from workers generation after generation.

In contrast, the strategy that has been offered to us by “feminists” and the left—the strategy to obtain more work—would only mean further enslavement to the present system. It is capital that poses work as the only natural destiny in our lives, not the working class, whose struggles are always directed toward gaining more money and less work. To pose the “right to work” as our road to liberation ignores that we are already working, and that housework does not wither away when we go out for a paid job. Our work at home simply intensifies: we do it at night when everybody is already asleep, or in the morning before everyone awakes, or on weekends. Our wages remain low—and they quickly disappear in paying for day-care centers, lunches, carfare, etc. Furthermore, with two jobs we have even less time to organize with other women. Unions have long accused women of being backward. But when did unions consider that we are not free to attend meetings after our second job is over because we must hurry to report back to our first one—picking up the kids at the day-care center or babysitter’s, getting to the supermarket before it closes, fixing dinner for the men who expect it to be ready when they come home from work?

Another illusion is that to go “out to work” is to break our isolation and gain the possibility of a social life. Very often the isolation of a typing pool or a secretarial office matches our isola-

tion in the home. We certainly aspire to a social life better than the one provided by an assembly line. But going out of the home is not much of a relief if we don’t have any money in our hands, or if we go out just for more work.

We also reject the idea that sharing our exploitation in the home with a man can be a strategy for liberation. “Sharing the housework” is not an invention of the Women’s Movement. Women have continuously tried to get men to share this work. Despite some victories, we have discovered that this battle also has many limitations. First, the man is not home most of the time. If he brings in the money, and we are economically dependent on him, we don’t have the power to force him to do housework. In fact it is often more work for us to get the man to share the work than do it ourselves. Most importantly, this strategy confines us to an individual struggle which does not give us the power (or the protection) of a mass struggle. *And it assumes that every woman has (or wants) a man with whom to share the work.*

As for a possible rationalization of housework, we must immediately say that we are not interested in making our work more efficient or more productive for capital. We are interested in reducing our work, and ultimately refusing it altogether. But as long as we work in the home for nothing, no one really cares how long or how hard we work. For capital only introduces advanced technology to cut its costs of production after wage gains by the working class. Only if we make our work cost (i.e., only if we make it uneconomical) will capital “discover” the technology to reduce it. At present, we often have to go out for a second shift of work to afford the dishwasher that should cut down our housework!

Who will pay for this work?

We demand wages for housework from the government for two major reasons. First, every sector of the economy benefits from our work—we don’t work for one boss, we work for all the bosses. Consequently we demand the money from the state. Second, the government already is *our* boss. In every country the government is responsible for guaranteeing an adequate labor force to industry. This means that the government directly regulates and controls our work through the family, world population control, immigration laws, and finally by entering the community whenever we refuse to perform our work.

The question “who will pay?” is usually posed so as to subvert the cause. It is assumed that the government is broke, and that our demand will only divide the working class by forcing the government to tax other workers to pay us a wage. In reality, by getting more power for ourselves, we will be giving more power not only to men (power not over us but with respect to their bosses) but to every sector (the young, the elderly, and the wageless in general). We will

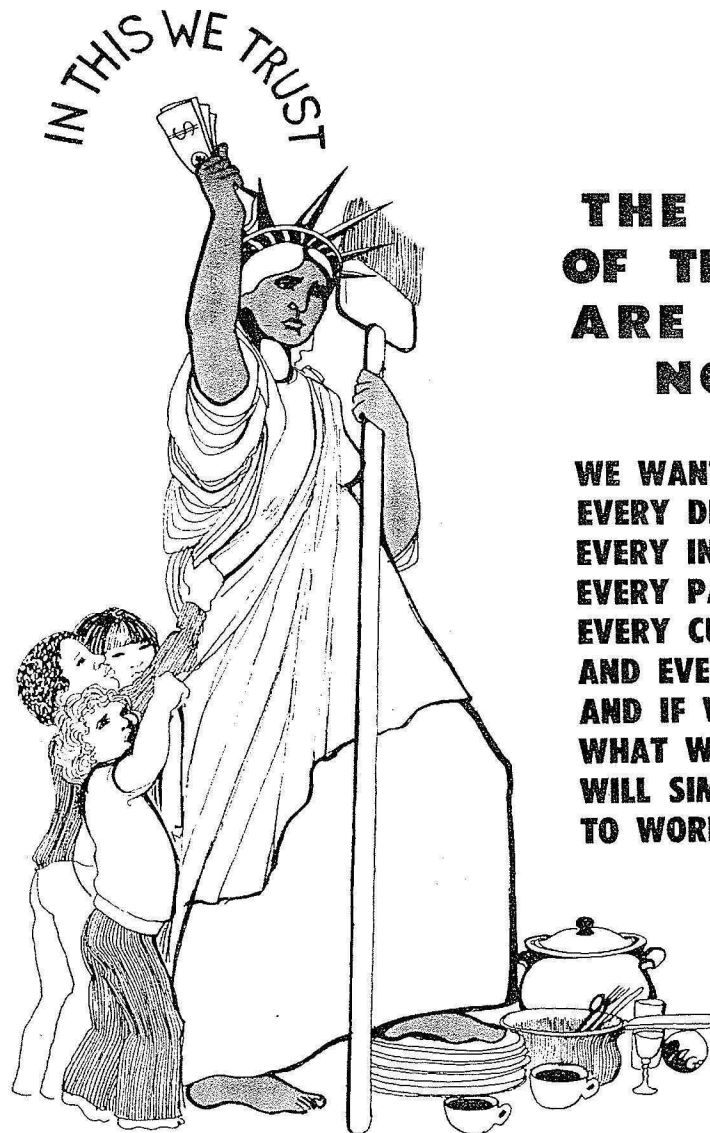
begin to break the power relations which so far have kept us divided. Through a united working class we can force the government to tax the corporations, not other workers.

A posture of defeat also ignores the struggles women have made against housework and what we have been able to win in relation to this work. It is no accident that after the massive struggles welfare mothers waged in the 1960s for more money from the government—the first money we have won for housework—the number of female-headed families has dramatically increased (doubling every decade) along with the number of divorces, particularly among

women with children, and the number of young women who have been able to set up independent households. This is not to glorify welfare. Welfare does not even begin to pay for all our work—we need much more and we need it for all of us. But it is to recognize how even a little money has begun to break down some of the most powerful mechanisms of discipline which traditionally have kept us in line.

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## THE WOMEN OF THE WORLD ARE SERVING NOTICE!

**WE WANT WAGES FOR  
EVERY DIRTY TOILET  
EVERY INDECENT ASSAULT  
EVERY PAINFUL CHILDBIRTH  
EVERY CUP OF COFFEE  
AND EVERY SMILE  
AND IF WE DON'T GET  
WHAT WE WANT WE  
WILL SIMPLY REFUSE  
TO WORK ANY LONGER!**

# WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

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