

10¢

THE
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT
AND THE
CLASS STRUGGLE

by

CINDY GIPPLE

REPRINTED BY:

RADICAL WOMEN
3815 - 5th N.E.
SEATTLE, WA. 98105

1-206-ME. 2 7449
PA. 5 0471

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Overview

The secondary status of women in U.S. society stems from the relationship we bear to social production. In a system where one's value as a social being is determined by one's role in economic production, women are so oppressed under capitalism that the majority still do not work outside the home, and all working women are paid less for their labor because of this. The housewife majority performs unpaid, domestic, isolated service to individual families, and all women are seen as an undifferentiated, non-productive sex, whose function is private, not public, and dependent, not wage-earning.

The same economic forces that places women in this secondary position, as a means of acquiring super profits, are responsible for the oppression of minorities and for the exploitation of workers. Discrimination, segregation, sexism and racism are all profitable and also politically stabilizing as they divide the working class. The resolution of the struggles of all exploited and oppressed peoples lies therefore in restructuring the socio-economic forces of capitalism indicating that we must learn to struggle together for our mutual benefit. Women, because of their special oppression, their super-exploitation in production and their understanding through their own experience of the general political repression produced by capitalism in crisis are in the singularly strategic position to lead the struggle for socialism for the end of all exploitation, because most women are uncorrupted by privilege and by affluence, never having had the chance to acquire them.

THE ROOTS OF SEXISM

The origin of our oppression helps us understand how the forces of economic production shape the forms of our existence.

In primitive hunting and gathering societies, women shared an equal position with men because all contributed directly in the production of the band. The efforts of all the members, especially the women, who were the providers of the only consistent food supply and the builders of shelter, were necessary for the survival of the tribe. The work of all members was respected and social relations of equality resulted.

However, as the mode of production changed, so did the relations between people. With the creation of surplus, through cultivation of land and the domestication of large herds, the positions of power changed from being equally distributed throughout society to being limited to just a few. These few were those who controlled the surplus and began to accumulate wealth. The people who assumed control were men, because men were the herders and cattle the first form of money. Matriarchy - descent through the female line - was overthrown, and patriarchal descent and rule were imposed, decreeing a rigid monogamy for the women to insure the proper inheritance mechanisms. Women eventually became the slaves of men, deprived of all rights, useful only for their breeding and janitorial services.

As we lost the opportunity to participate directly in social production and became relegated to private labor, we lost our respected status. It is at this point in history that the oppression of women began. Our labor no longer contributed to the production of society as a whole, but to the benefit of individual men. It is clear that in order to regain equality, we must again assume an equal role in society's production process.

THE ROOTS OF CLASS STRUGGLE

The same conditions that brought about the oppression of women, ie., the development of a surplus product, also created class society. The patriarchal community itself was broken up by a class differentiation between rich and poor, free and slave, merchant and artisan. A few men were able to accumulate great wealth and they eventually gained control over all the means of production. Consequently, in the final state of class society, capitalism, the majority must sell its labor power to a few, the owners of the means of production.

The class struggle is the fight of working people to assume control over their own labor power by improving wages and conditions and ultimately taking back control of the means of production and gaining back ownership of the product. In order to end their exploitation, the working class must completely restructure the productive process.

A COMMON GOAL

The material economic origin of the exploitation of workers and the oppression of women indicate that the solution of both struggles lies in the same direction. We must work together to destroy the system which oppresses us all-- capitalism.

However, the specific benefits to be achieved by either group are somewhat different. The demand of the women's movement is the end to sexual discrimination on all levels; the goal of the class struggle is an end to the exploitation of working people.

In the past, working women have joined with working men to bring about reforms that would benefit all working people, only to find that their working brothers sold them out. The men were willing to accept the leadership and help in labor struggles, but then were not willing to grant equal rights to women within the labor movement. Today women comprise 38% of the work force, and they are its most exploited sector. Until female labor is emancipated, no labor is free.

So we cannot afford to relinquish our rights again. It is essential that we have a clear understanding of the relationship between the women's movement and the class struggle. We must know at what point the women's movement and the class struggle cease to be the same struggle and become opponents within the labor movement itself. We must learn to defend ourselves against male chauvinist workers -- to march together , yet separately until mutual support becomes a true two-way street.

DIFFERENCES IN THE TWO MOVEMENTS

By understanding these differences between the women's movement and the class struggle, we can determine at what point their goals are divergent. One difference is that the majority of women are still in the home serving individual men rather than participating directly in production; they lack the opportunity and the arena of struggle against those forces which cause their oppression. A prerequisite for the elimination of sexual exploitation is the movement on a mass scale of women out of the jurisdiction of individual men and into the social work force. This demand of the women's movement must be achieved before women can influence and orient the class struggle sufficiently for the total restructuring of the economy, social institutions and the culture.

Another difference between the two movements is that within the working class, the oppression of women is two-fold. We are exploited as workers by our employers and oppressed as women by both our employers and fellow male workers. We are relegated to low-paying drudge jobs. We are largely unorganized, or if we belong to unions, they are male controlled. Protective legislation such as work load limits keeps us from getting jobs that we are capable of performing or is used as justification for keeping us in lower paying jobs and paying us less than men for the same work.

We are still given the responsibility for the care of children and home. Women must not only face exploitation on the job, but must provide child care and do the shopping, laundry, cooking and house cleaning. Before women can participate massively in the labor movement, our demands for equal pay for equal work, free child care, equality in education, training and hiring, and equal leadership roles, must become the demands of working men as well as working women.

The third differentiation between the women's movement and the class struggle is that women are more militant and potentially more radical. Because of our double oppression we are in a position to experience earlier and more intensely the effects of the brutal socio-economic order. Women are much harder hit by inflation and austerity programs like wage and price controls and this is particularly the case for minority women who are exploited and oppressed as women and as minorities. Working women understand from day-to-day experience the cruelties and inanity of capitalism. As mothers and keepers of the home, we are victimized by the inadequacies of major social institutions such as the schools, medicine, the law, welfare, transportation, housing, etc., etc. Our anger and frustration cannot be channeled into the system because we are kept out of it and its benefits. The only alternative to women is to struggle for radical change. We understand that capitalism is incapable of answering our demands for equality and justice and we demand revolutionary change. Finally, where all workers are exploited as a class, all women are oppressed as a sex, regardless of class. And this means we have allies in all classes, rendering our struggle enormously broad and all-encompassing. We understand the need for solidarity with all oppressed people because we are all of them.

Synthesis: A Feminist Victory through Revolutionary Class Struggle

Women are in a strategic position to lead the struggle for socialism because we come in all classes, races and countries. It is our historic opportunity and responsibility as women to mobilize international political ferment on every level of society in every land. Our common humanity, raised to a high degree of revolutionary political organization, is the only force capable of revitalizing the international class struggle and attaining liberation for all the oppressed. But this tremendous army of aroused women must operate through and with the proletariat, because theirs is the point of strategic power capable of "stopping the country". And simultaneously, the women's legions must organize politically as radicals and provide a new and desperately-needed leadership to a pre-dominantly sexist movement, sexist in its myopic prejudice that the class struggle is everything, and the class means white males--or sexist in its opportunist demagogic about women's liberation so long as same is large and influential.

Feminism--women's rights--is inseparable from socialism. Capitalism cannot eradicate sexism--or racism or poverty or war or wage exploitation--without killing itself. So oppressed people grope for a socialist solution which can only come about through revolutionary politics through a party of the working class and all the other wretched of the earth. Feminism means re-direction of the class struggle in both its aspects: economic struggle and political organization. We must take hold in both these spheres, as a means of gaining reforms necessary for survival and pressuring Labor and Radical Politics to come to grips with our issues. And meanwhile, we must also work to radicalize the feminist movements which means to teach it the historic and strategic need to kick its petty bourgeois program and style and make common cause with working women, the working class, and revolutionary politics!

By: Cindy Gipple

Published by: RADICAL WOMEN

* This publication is on file at:
International Womens History Archive
2325 Oak Street
Berkeley, California 94708