

Proletarian Unity League

## 2, 3, Many Parties of a New Type? Against the Ultra-Left Line

### Chapter 4: "Left" Opportunism in Political Line C. "Left" Liquidation of the Woman Question

The "left" view that the struggle for democracy threatens the fight for proletarian power naturally includes the struggle for women's emancipation, one of the two great democratic tasks of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the U.S. The same "leftist" logic prevails, the same litany of the "three oppositions." Oppose democratic reforms because they represent an **unnecessary diversion**--"pure proletarian" struggle is the quickest way to women's emancipation. Oppose democratic reforms because they represent a **dangerous trap**--they subordinate class-consciousness to bourgeois feminism. Oppose democratic reforms because they represent an **impossible dream**--no reforms are possible under capitalism.

The oppressed nationalities are more proletarian in composition than the population as a whole. Women, however, find themselves outnumbered by men at work by a significant ratio, and are less concentrated in decisive sections of basic industry. This helps explain why the same "left" economist logic can lead to a more overt liquidationism on the woman question. The failure of the Marxist-Leninists to devote much theoretical time to problems of women's oppression or the struggle for women's emancipation; the failure of the Marxist-Leninists (with some exceptions) to attempt to give the women's democratic movement communist leadership, or to see that as an important task; the failure of the Marxist-Leninists (again with some exceptions) to attempt to build mass working class women's organizations, or to see this as an important task; all these bear witness to liquidationist tendencies on the fight for women's emancipation.

"Leftism" on the woman question most often reflects the influence of anarcho-syndicalism. Proceeding from the recognition that full participation in social production--a participation which only socialism can insure--is a necessary condition to full equality for women, many comrades believe that taking part in production will of itself prove sufficient for women's emancipation. This view evidences a **workerist** and economist conception of political struggle. It tends to elevate class being over class stand, emphasizing the effects of the struggle for production over the class struggle, failing therefore to "take class struggle as the key link." As such it

is a part of a broader "productive forces theory," in which the development of the productive forces functions as the motor force of history.

We do not argue with the decision to concentrate on women in industrial production, especially those women in the large factories. Socialized production provides favorable opportunities for the struggle against "domestic slavery" and the backward ideologies which it nourishes. But "left" economism, by its refusal to formulate our **political tasks** in this sphere, focuses its attention at most on simple issues of trade-union equality and fails to address the broad political issues related to women's oppression. Such an approach not only ignores the all-class character of women's oppression and our tasks in relation to the masses of petit-bourgeois and even bourgeois women, but also hesitates to take up our tasks in relation to women in non-unionized commerce and service occupations, where the majority of working women are found.

Since "left" economism trots out substantially the same arguments in belittling the democratic struggles of women as it does in criticizing the national democratic movements, we needn't review them here. The opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment by groups such as the RU/RCP cloaks itself in appeals to socialism and the "working class" while refusing the working class its "schooling in the struggle for democracy" (Lenin). In more blatant forms, "left liquidationism" finishes by rejecting even such essentially trade-unionist demands as super-seniority and preferential hiring for women workers.

A largely abstentionist position towards the movement for women's emancipation also characterizes "Leftism" on the woman question. This abstentionism grounds itself in a subjectivist identification of the women's democratic movement with feminism; in a confusion of feminism as an ideology with the several "feminisms" as political forces; and most importantly, in a hostility towards the various class forces this movement necessarily includes.

Women from all classes fight for women's emancipation from male-supremacist oppression. Owing to their respective class interests, they fight differently, and they build different organizations. By and large, working class women are not found in the so-called "organized women's movement." Instead, they struggle in the organizations of their class and the broader masses -- unions, tenant and community organizations, Parent-Teachers Associations and other parents' educational groups, consumer organizations, etc. Among working class women, we note a modest Leftward trend, a trend recognized by the labor aristocracy in its sponsorship of CLUW, and which also expresses itself in the founding of organizations like Union WAGE.

Though largely organized by petit-bourgeois women, the consumer boycotts of the past several years have likewise witnessed a growing activation of working class women.

Almost unremarked by Marxist-Leninists, this Leftward trend is evident among other classes within the organized women's democratic movement. Within the "organized women's movement," the eclipse of "radical feminism" by "socialist feminism" registers a movement in the direction of Marxism. Even the mass organization most closely associated with liberal bourgeois feminism, the National Organization of Women, has moved to the Left under slogans like "Out of the Mainstream, Into the Revolution!" For its part, the bourgeoisie has viewed these developments with open alarm, an alarm translated into an obvious drive by elements like Betty Friedan to recapture or wreck NOW.

Where Marxist-Leninists have shouldered ongoing tasks around women's oppression, they have tended to concentrate their attention in organizations like CLUW. Trade unions are the most basic, comprehensive organizations of the working class, and we have no quarrel with such an orientation. But work within CLUW did little to challenge the prevailing attitudes towards the movement for women's emancipation whether reformist or "left" economist. Its framework and the stranglehold exercised by the labor lieutenants of capital encouraged maneuvering for position with bureaucrats, given the absence of a political program for working women. CLUW's narrow emphasis on trade-union officials did not provide a vehicle for the development of a working class women's movement. For all that, some communist groups with strong anarcho-syndicalist tendencies simply boycotted the organization, in a merger of "left" abstentionism towards reformist organizations and "left" liquidationism towards the woman question. The "left" antics of others, like the OL, played into the bureaucrats' hands, and helped sabotage resistance to them.

### **Communists and the Organized Women's Movement**

The undifferentiated antagonism towards feminism reveals a mistaken, subjectivist appraisal of our tasks as communists. Feminism assumes different forms among different classes and strata, including where feminist ideology penetrates among the proletariat. While the ideological differences between liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism may, in the final analysis, amount to little, politics is not conducted "in the final analysis," and the political positions these ideologies represent can take on practical importance. Marxist-Leninists should couple a coherent theoretical critique of feminism in all its forms with support for feminist forces insofar as they fight for the emancipation of the masses of women, or failing that, for

democratic reforms while not opposing the struggle of the masses. Denunciations of the present-day organized women's movement as a largely white, middle-class movement, while objectively true, confuse ideological problems with our political tasks, and the symptom of a thing with its cause. The problem with the women's democratic movement is not that it includes petty-bourgeois and even bourgeois women. These are the more politically volatile sections of the population, the first to familiarize themselves with progressive ideas and to rise to political activity. The problem lies in that the working class, both men and women, has not taken its rightful place as the leading and main force in the struggle against the oppression of women under capitalism. With that absence goes an understanding not only of the need for socialist revolution, but also of the importance of the struggle against white supremacy for the emancipation of women as well as for the emancipation of the proletariat.

"How will the working class assume such a position? Will it assume it by itself? No, Will reformists, revisionists, communalists, Utopians, anarcho-feminists, etc. organize it to assume such a position? Certainly not. "It is up to us to organize the people. As for the reactionaries in China, it is up to us to organize the people to overthrow them." "(Mao, SW IV, p. 19)

Should communists oppose the organization of petty-bourgeois women and even bourgeois women to fight for women's emancipation, for consistent democracy, for national equality, for day care, for jobs, for equality in the family, against male supremacist ideology, against genocidal sterilization policies, against rape, for free abortion on demand, against the ravages of inflation, for the health and welfare of their children, against the threats of war and fascism, and for socialism? Even posing the question should answer it. The tasks of communists in regard to the oppression of women include the development of women as communist leaders of the working class and its Party and the leadership of the struggles of the masses of working class women against their exploitation as workers, their oppression as oppressed nationalities and their oppression as women under capitalism, and for the dictatorship of the proletariat. They further include the rallying of all progressive and democratic-minded women against their oppression, their education to the necessity of socialism and of the fight against national oppression for the full equality of women, and their organization around the proletariat, while respecting their own specific interests and needs. These tasks do not include the denunciation of petty-bourgeois women for being petty-bourgeois women, or opposition to democratic reforms which may (or may not!) largely affect women of the petty-bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie heaves might and main to organize the masses of petty-bourgeois and backward working class women under its ideological and

political hegemony. Failure to contest with the reactionaries for leadership of these women gravely endangers the proletarian revolution, as the history of class struggle here and abroad demonstrates time after time. One need only reflect on the mobilization of petty-bourgeois women by the reactionaries in Chile, But examples closer to home merit even more attention. The willingness to compromise with white-supremacy and the disenfranchisement of Afro-Americans marked the hegemony of bourgeois reformists in an earlier U.S. women's movement, and the defusing of that movement's revolutionary-democratic potentials. Where the revolutionary proletariat isolates itself from the masses of non-proletarian women, or fails to support and give leadership to the democratic thrust of their struggles, it can expect a similar and equally if not more disastrous outcome. The mobilization of masses of women by reactionaries against the ERA and in the anti-busing movements, should give revolutionary-minded workers and intellectuals a foretaste of what the bourgeoisie has in store on this front. If the communists refuse to challenge the Right for leadership of the broad democratic women's movement, that outcome is insured. And abstentionism is insured if Marxist-Leninists cling to the logic of ultra-leftism and oppose democratic advances to a "pure proletarian" movement:

"Women will not abandon their old faith except to embrace the new with enthusiasm. They will not and cannot be neutral. The choice lies between their hostility and their devotion. Some, no doubt, despising obstacles, strong and convinced, will persist in spite of their humiliations. But such natures are rare. Most human beings are impressed chiefly by facts and discouraged by injustice...

"From one point of view the history of France since '89 could well be written as the **History of the Inconsequences of the Revolutionary Party**. The woman question would take up the longest chapter, and in it we should read how this Party managed to hand over to the enemy half of its troops, who asked no more than to be allowed to march and fight in its ranks." (Mme. Andre Leo, "La Sociale," No. 39, May 8, 1871)

This raises one final issue. The hostility to the non-proletarian forces within the women's democratic movement also determines the relatively un-Marxist views on the family which find currency among Marxist-Leninists. These views have a Rightist rather than a "Leftist" source, but the generalized belligerence towards petty-bourgeois democracy protects these unreflected attitudes from criticism. Within the so-called "organized women's movement" various Utopian schemes for the abolition of the nuclear family contend. Sometimes these tendencies draw support from the "Left" Communist attitudes and practices common in the Soviet Union during the 1920's, where many agitated and organized for the immediate suppression

of the family (some argue that these "left" attitudes contributed to the later growth of the Soviet bourgeoisie). Against these fantasies, Marxist-Leninists have correctly pointed out that no mass alternative to the family exists or can exist under capitalism or even under early stages of socialism. But in opposing such erroneous petty-bourgeois lines, or in fighting bourgeois attacks on working class and especially oppressed nationality families, many comrades have taken to ignoring fundamental Marxist theses on the historical evolution of the nuclear family. The family constitutes a "pillar of class society," and marriage exists as a property relationship, even where the partners own no property. In neglecting to analyze these features the right error reveals its solidarity with the ultra-left: both refuse to take up the struggle for equality **within** the family.