

CAMPUS SPARTACIST

Published by Campus Spartacist Club-- labor donated-- January, 1971

Austin Women's Liberation Conference

"One Step Forward, Two Steps Back"

(part 2 of a series on the women's liberation movement)

A mistaken notion prevalent in the women's liberation movement is that politics, especially radical politics, is "male." Just as the economy is not male, so is politics not male. However, this wrong idea pervaded the women's liberation conference held in Austin this fall, being especially noticeable at the workshop on the WL movement and the Left. Apparently agreeing with the idea that logic and rationality are male, an idea expressed in an earlier speech by Austin Worker, Barbara Wuensch, some women at the workshop said that all political groups are male dominated, that leadership was a male idea, that the forms of organization used by political groups were male forms and some women at the conference even objected to voting on motions because this would bring about discussion of issues at the conference and political discussion is, of course, divisive?

However,

"Just as we can't write off the lessons and knowledge of the past, neither can we write off ideas, because they were formulated by men. Charles Darwin was probably a male chauvinist, but we don't conclude that the theory of evolution is therefore wrong. Maybe Marx was a chauvinist, too. But his analysis of the nature of capitalism, his revolutionary theory and his concept of what is involved in the building of a socialist society, directly bear upon and are invaluable to us in our struggle for liberation.

"The point is that we must judge all ideas on the basis of their content, not on the sex of the thinker! If a theory is wrong, inadequate, or irrelevant, it is because of its content, not because it is a 'male' creation."

(Women's Liberation, Revolution, The Class Struggle, published by the Socialist Workshop).

Blanket statements about male dominated politics and organizations are not valid, because they criticize, not the content of the ideas or the usefulness of the forms, but the (supposed) sex of their originators. This is simple

name calling. Furthermore, such statements are themselves male chauvinist in character, since they do not credit the women involved in political organizations with any real contributions to the politics of their organization. The Left, for example, has a strong tradition of women leaders.

The divisions which occur in the course of political struggle are healthy; they are the result of political clarification. Splits are sometimes necessary to free people with differing fundamental views to work in the way they think is correct. Divisions along lines of political principles are not damaging to the movement as a whole unless sectarians refuse to work with different groups for specific common goals. Splits-- whether they are organization splits or simple split votes over a motion-- are necessary so that political progress can be made, so that people can see different approaches in action, and weigh their effectiveness.

For members of ostensibly democratic-centralist Marxist groups to say that democratic voting is divisive, therefore wrong, is hypocritical to the point of red-baiting. When the conference chairman, Laura Maggi, a YSA'er, tried to oppose voting on those grounds, she was either committing herself to fighting against democracy within the YSA, or she was just trying to avoid dealing with the political differences between the YSA and other groups by de-politicizing the conference.

Nothing is more damaging to the WL movement than pretending differences do not exist when they actually do, than pretending that women can never disagree with each other politically, than pretending that even though some women belong to the YSA, some to the Spartacist League, some to the Democratic Party, some disdaining all these groups, yet somehow, in spite of this, "sisterhood" will transcend all!

Women must develop a theory

and strategy for action. They cannot be satisfied with a defensive movement, but must forge a program of demands around which to struggle and organize. If this is not done carefully and consciously, then it will be done carelessly and unconsciously, and the resultant program will not be complete or effective. If fear of factionalism prevents us reaching decisions democratically, then the decisions will be reached undemocratically-- that is, they will be made by those who have the most influence and power in the organization. The very women who are afraid now to elect leaders will find themselves following unelected leaders; they will find themselves with little power to change the situation, and no means of expressing criticism.

Exclusion of Men

If men's ideas can be judged by their content, there is no reason to exclude men from participation in the WL movement. Furthermore, if it is a shameful waste of resources for society to disregard women's ideas, to not make use of women's contributions to society, then it is equally shameful for the WL movement to disregard the contributions of men to its struggle. This was done at the conference by excluding men from everything but a special, women-supervised men's workshop. Placing men in a subservient position may serve as a form of revenge for embittered women, but it should not be the aim of the WL movement.

Members of the Spartacist League proposed early in the conference that men should be admitted freely to all its functions. Though the chairman tried to avoid voting on the motion, the vote was held after hurried discussion, and the motion was defeated, as was a motion to admit men to a limited number of the plenary speeches. These motions, however, received a significant minority of votes from the women who were supposedly already "united" on the exclusion of men and in no need of discussion. The arguments against the motion included everything from the pseudo-psychologism of "Why are you so dependent on men for your self-image?" to "Men will disrupt the meeting with their stupid questions and male chauvinist actions and statements. It was said that women would only pay attention to the men if they were admitted; and that some women would not say anything in front of men.

The psychologism can be ans-

wered with its converse, "Why are you so dependent on excluding men to boost your own self-image?" As to the other reasons, while men may indeed ask some stupid questions (they might also ask some smart ones; though no one mentioned that possibility), so might women, especially women new to the movement, and no one would think of excluding them. If questions are regarded as necessary to educating people, and education on women's oppression is regarded as necessary, surely men's questions, even stupid ones, need to be answered.

If men or women disrupt meetings with their actions, or if their statements betray fundamental disagreement or hostility with the goals of the movement, then they should be excluded from meetings. Women's Liberation has every right to close its meetings to people who are in political disagreement; but agreement or disagreement cannot be determined in advance by sex.

Women who will not talk in front of men must be encouraged to do so. But simply removing men from the immediate environment does not strike to the root of this problem. Many of these women feel that they have nothing to say, or are too shy to express their ideas. Often this self-judgement is too critical-- they do have something to say, and other people who know they do, men included, can help them to gain self-confidence by encouraging them to express themselves. We all need to learn to think on our feet, and to gain experience in speaking, and in leading a movement. Many women will find they can make more progress in a mixed group, as they learn that they are not inferior to the other men and women in the group.

Toward Working Women

The overall make-up of the conference was indicative of another problem: almost everybody there was from a middle-class background. This is both the cause and the result of the present WL orientation toward psychological oppression and the problems of "professional" and student women. Working women suffer psychological oppression of course, but this is overshadowed in severity by oppression suffered in the factories: much lower wages, boring and tedious job categories, etc. Recent proof that the WL movement tends to forget working women in its concern over psychological and professional problems was the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment. Most WL

groups supported this amendment for the sake of benefitting professional women, even though it could, and has, stripped assembly-line women of their protective legislation (seating, restrooms, breaks, limits on long hours, etc.). The WL movement is permeated with non-action therapy "rap" groups, useful maybe to some women, but not at all relating to concrete job oppression, and offering no solutions other than personal ones. Working women will not join a movement with this orientation. And without them, without their ability to strike and disrupt the economy, the WL movement is helpless.

National Organization

The missing element in the WL movement is unity on the national level, based on a radical program. So far, WL has been fragmented into local groups and there has been no national organization that could include all women in meaningful struggle. In fact, the only national group is N.O.W., which has a liberal, work-within-the-system approach unacceptable to the majority of women in the movement. A national, democratic, non-exclusionary

Trade Unions and Socialism,

The demand for a sliding scale of wages and hours corresponds to the conditions of unemployment and war inflation which haunt the working class today. But the teamster, G.E. and auto strikes demonstrated that no demand which is costly to the capitalist class can be won without long, militant battles. To such demands, employers first complain: "We can't afford it." To which labor must respond with another transitional demand: "Prove it. Open the books." The right of workers to have complete access to business accounts and "secrets" is the beginning of real workers' control. If railroad magnates say to workers' demands: "Giving in to these demands would make it impossible for us to go on running the railroads," then workers must respond: "Then we must nationalize the railroads and run them ourselves. Even Meany, in the recent railroad dispute, has called for nationalization. But he and the rest of the "labor lieutenants of the capitalist class" have no intention of mobilizing the rank-and-file for the enormous social struggles required to force nationalization. The rank-and-file must throw out the Meany misleaders and elect their own leadership. For rank-and-file control of the unions!

In both the teamster and postal wildcats, every member of both the Democratic and Republican parties called for breaking the strikes because in every sharp social stru-

women's organization based on a radical program is necessary for the successful unified struggle of women for their own liberation.

Need for Socialism

Lastly, and most importantly, women need to recognize that the oppression of women is deeply rooted in the day-to-day functioning of capitalist society, and cannot be purged without destroying the system itself. Under socialism, the ideology and economic system of the working class, the flowering of women's rights and equality-- indeed, of all human equality-- would at last be possible. A society founded in inequality holds out no hope for any oppressed group; but in a socialist society based on equality there is room for the free development of all. Knowing this, a unified and militant women's movement can contribute heavily to a successful socialist revolution and, after victory, demand and secure equality for all women. Women will play a major role in the leadership of the revolutionary struggle, if they unite now to form a militant and socialist-oriented national organization of women's liberation.

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ggle the Democratic and Republican parties are exposed for what they are, capitalist parties. Thus, a working-class political alternative to the two capitalist parties must be created. This alternative can only come from the rank-and-file labor movement in the form of labor candidates and a labor party. Whether such a party represents a qualitative step forward for the movement or merely another diversion along the path of reformism, depends on the political program the labor party is willing to fight for. The American Left will have an unprecedented opportunity to break out of its isolation by providing leadership in the formation of the labor party and its program.

The actual implementation of a militant trade union program requires the greatest care as to timing and tactics. It requires the sharing of experiences between militant workers and revolutionaries, that crosses occupational, local and national boundaries and that reaches into the past for the important lessons of labor history. It requires the closest coordination of the intervention into the daily class struggle. The revolutionary party is the organization through which experience is shared, the historical lessons are embodied and action is guided and coordinated. The Spartacist League is dedicated to building such a party both within the U.S. and internationally.

Trade Unions and Socialism
Part III: The Spartacist League's Program for Trade Unions

The task of revolutionaries is "to put before the labor movement its final objective: the socialist revolution." In no other country is this task more important and at the same time more difficult than in the U.S., the bastion of world imperialism. Whether the enormous productivity and technology of this country are used in the service of building a better world or whether they are used to crush the social aspirations of the oppressed by continuous global conflict, depends on whether the American working class is won to socialism.

How can this be done in a country where the working class exhibits indifference or hostility to socialism? We must see beyond the political backwardness of the American worker. We must begin with his daily struggle for survival against a fundamentally hostile social system. This struggle frequently breaks out into strikes, wildcats, and class violence. When it comes to raw labor militancy, the American worker has a record which is second to none, as the recent postal, teamster, and railroad strikes demonstrated.

Teamsters in Ohio, for example were willing to battle not only their employers, but politicians of every stripe, from "law-and-order" friend of the Mafia, Gov. Rhodes, to "friends of labor" liberal-doves like Mayor Stokes and Sen. Saxby. They defied their own union misleaders. When the president of Ohio teamsters union called the wildcat "communist-led", a rank-and-file leader responded by addressing his local at a meeting as "my fellow communists." The strikers engaged scabs and cops in hand-to-hand combat. When scabs and cops couldn't break the strike and Gov. Rhodes called in the national guard, the teamsters fought off the guard. They held their ground and won the strike. But in doing so they had to face down the whole spectrum of capitalist institutions, political, legal, economic and military. The teamsters did their job and did it well. Whether the teamsters draw the political lessons from their strike and are won to socialism, depends on how well the socialist movement does its job.

To break the contradiction between labor's militancy and political backwardness:

"It is necessary to help the masses in the process of daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist

program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat." (Trotsky, Transitional Program).

One transitional demand that stems from "today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class" is the demand for a sliding scale of wages and hours. The sliding scale of wages is more popularly known as the "cost-of-living (c.o.l.) escalator." This means that when the cost of living goes up, wages automatically go up. It is the only way to protect wages from inflation and insure that wage gains are real gains. In the late fifties, 4 million workers had c.o.l. escalators in their contract. By 1970 only 2½ million workers were covered. Further, the figure for the fifties represents "full" escalators while the 1970 figure includes 2 million workers who had "capped" escalators which means they received only a specific wage increase no matter how much or how fast the cost of living went up. A capped escalator stole \$1000 from every auto worker over the course of their last three year contract. Considering that there are 700,000 auto workers in the U.S., you can see why the struggle for a full c.o.l. escalator was such a bitter fight.

The sliding scale of hours means that as unemployment increases, the work week is shortened. Take an industry with a high rate of unemployment, like construction. Instead of calling for Nixon to take jobs away from white construction workers and give them to unemployed blacks (the Philadelphia Plan), the Left should raise the demand for "30 for 40": a 30-hour work-week for a full 40-hour pay check. This opens up 25% more jobs in the construction trades for blacks and it gives all workers 25% more time off with no loss in pay. This is a demand which cuts through the racial tension caused by unemployment and exacerbated by making white workers pay for black unemployment by giving up their jobs. It is a demand that forges the class unity of white workers and black unemployed in a common struggle around their common interests. And it throws the burden on those who cause unemployment: the capitalist class.

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