

**WOMEN,
THE UNIONS
AND WORK
OR
WHAT IS NOT TO BE DONE
SELMA JAMES**

**NORTH AMERICAN
INTRODUCTION**

BY SILVIA FEDERICI

W O M E N ,

T H E U N I O N S A N D W O R K

Or What Is Not To Be Done

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The discussion generated in the women's movement in the U. K. by this pamphlet has resulted, among other things, in the formation of the Power of Women Collective which started meeting in the spring of 1973. The first issue of the Power of Women Journal (March/April 1974) describes its formation:

"The movement seemed to have reached an impasse. Many people were unhappy with the equal rights perspective embodied in the four demands (equal pay, equal education and opportunity, nurseries and abortion, and contraception). This perspective did not seem to reflect either our needs or our possibilities. It reflected the idea, always strong in the movement, that women's liberation must come from a job outside the home.

"The Collective did not see any jobs - for women or men - as liberation. We also rejected the racism of equating birth control with control of our bodies when population control is being used everywhere to deny Third World women especially the right to have children. We wanted a strategy that would not involve women in yet more work and would not give the State more control over our bodies...

"The discussions in the Collective have therefore centred on the perspective of wages for housework. We are discussing what that perspective, and the struggle for that wage, means for us as women - the degree to which it uncovers how much work we do for capital, and at the same time the possibility of rejecting that work. We are discussing how the lives of all women living alone, with men, with children, or with other women, are determined by the unwaged work women do in the home and elsewhere. We are discussing what having financial independence from men, and being able to see ourselves as separate from men, would mean, both in terms of our personal relationships, and in terms of our ability to struggle against the work that capital assigns to us as women. Our perspective has given us a new understanding of what the class struggle is about - of the fight to work less and be paid more, and of the fact that women are central to that struggle..."

Selma James

Summer 1974

Introduction to the American Edition of WOMEN, THE UNIONS AND WORK

or What is Not to be Done

Beyond the variety of demands and organisational forms which have characterised the Women's Liberation Movement during the last four years, one question still lies wide open: what are we struggling for? Are we struggling to improve our lives within the limits provided by the existing structures, or are we struggling to destroy an exploitative system, which improves aspects of our lives only to make exploitation more acceptable to us? In other words, are we going to help capitalism to smooth its contradictions and rationalise its domination, or are we uniting to put an end to it?

The rapidity with which individual capitalists and the State have adopted some of our demands is already teaching us a lesson. We demanded control over our bodies and now we are handed down abortion to control the rate at which we produce surplus laborers, to control welfare recipients and potential "troublemakers." We wanted to re-write our history (Her-story), but instead we found ourselves enrolled into "Women's Studies" where our anger is cooled off through the filter of academic "investigation." We left our "woman's place" but soon discovered that this place extended wherever we went.

The real question at this point is what we can do to prevent this inversion from happening again. What kind of struggles can we organise that would not be mediated, that would not be used to control us and divide us again, but instead accelerate the process of our liberation?

Women, the Unions and Work deals directly with these questions and in this sense its significance for the women's movement in the USA cannot be overestimated. The fact that it was written in England hardly presents any problem. At the present level of international integration, the response of the capitalists to women's and other working class struggle is increasingly unified and easily

exported; which means, however, that our struggle today has an international dimension and requires an international strategy. If possible Women, the Unions and Work is even more relevant for the American women's movement since in the USA processes it analyses are more open and more completed.

A central point in Women, the Unions and Work is that the easiest way to see our struggles coopted is to compromise the autonomy of our movement either to the needs of capitalist development or to the political programs of the left. The left, in fact, by its traditional blindness to the position of women in the capitalist organisation of work (in the capitalist process of accumulation), has constantly counterposed and sacrificed "women's liberation" to "class struggle," thus perpetuating those divisions and power relations within the class upon which capital has always thrived. Women, the Unions and Work makes it clear, however, that to break organisationally with the groups of the left will not by itself guarantee the autonomy of our movement and will certainly be useless if we carry with us programs and organisational forms which once again sweep our needs as women under the rug.

It is in this context that the pamphlet rejects the proposals - so popular, unfortunately, even among the American left - to "emancipate" women by means of their further subordination to large-scale industrialisation and unionisation. They view this "emancipation" as a supposedly necessary premise to the acquisition of a revolutionary consciousness. (Ironically, the same left in the USA sheds tears because the largely industrialised and unionised male workers have lost their revolutionary spirit and are concerned only with "bread and butter" demands. But this should cause no surprise. Rather it is a further proof that the left is and has always been unable to understand the dynamics of class struggle and capital as well. That is, it has never understood the struggle of any section of the working class.)

Unlike most contemporary analyses which view the shortcomings of the unions as aberrations, in terms of bureaucratisation, if not of personal corruption, Women, the Unions and Work roots the character of these organisations in the political programs which they exist to embody. From this becomes clear, for example, that it is no accident that the unions, both in the USA and Europe, have a long record of discrimination against women and minorities, racism and even national chauvinism (for example, see the ad sponsored by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union protesting that "American" jobs are stolen by "the Japanese"). The unions in fact are inseparable from the organisation of work and production which is the basis of capitalist society; which means that by their own nature (institutionalised since the Wagner Act) the unions consider workers only as a capitalist commodity, simply labor power, whose price (the wage) has to be regulated and fixed to allow for capitalist planning and prevent social conflict.

This explains why the unions never fight against exploitation, but at best fight for a better distribution of income, and even this only with regard to certain strata of the class. But this explains also why over the last 30 years, both in the USA and Europe, the power of unionism and the power of the working class have been inversely proportional. The example of the miners in Britain cited in Women, the Unions and Work is by itself striking. We must add, however, that far from being an isolated case the autonomy from the unions asserted by the mining community was a common feature in the wave of proletarian struggles that in the sixties in the USA, Britain, Italy, France, shook up the basis of capitalist power. In each case, to assert their autonomy from the unions meant for workers to assert their autonomy from the plans and the logic of capital, that uses the mediation of unions (and workers' parties in general) to bargain every concession made to workers for an increase in their productivity, that is, in their exploitation. In the USA the struggles of Welfare Mothers also were successful to the extent that they took place outside of any institutional control; and this was no accident, given the subversive character of their demand for more money independent

of work , whereby they refused the capitalists' alternatives of waged work or marriage , i.e. , unwaged work .

We can understand then why Women, the Unions and Work warns us that to put forward unionisation as a strategy for women means to play right into the hands of capital which on a national and international level is facing the problem of restoring the trust of workers in its traditional instruments of control and directing into legal channels all the disruptive forces that emerged from the struggles of the sixties: immigrants, Blacks, students and, crucial to all these, women .

This is particularly clear in the USA where devising a policy for women has been a top priority for capital for many years . The spiralling of the numbers of welfare recipients (mostly women) , "illegitimate" births , and "high risk" children pointed to the disintegration of the most sacred of bourgeois institutions: the work ethic - that is, the principle that one must be exploited in order to live - and the family as the center for the production, reproduction and disciplining of labor power . It is against this threat that the American capitalists have dyed the worn-out banners of unions and work with a new feminist color , thus joining their British partners in the sudden complaint about "the enormous economic waste the underutilisation of women produces ."

Unlike the Night Cleaners in Britain , their American sisters will not have to fight to be admitted to the unions . On this side of the ocean , their unionisation is sponsored at the highest levels : no less than Mayor Lindsay has called for the support by women's groups for "a drive to unionise household workers ." (He has not yet included housewives in this . But depending on how disruptive housewives can be in their own interest , the mayor can incorporate them too .) Nixon's appeal to the construction workers' unions to open their ranks to include minorities - but of course along well-defined quotas - has set the model for capital's new strategy for women . What this overall strategy means for us has been involuntarily

summarised by that Chicago paper that, reporting a women's strike against working conditions in a plant, commented that this was an attack against Women's Liberation. And it was certainly right if the "liberation" we accept and even demand is a liberation for work instead of from work.

It is against this background that we must consider the demands put forward by Women, the Unions and Work.

Obviously it is impossible to analyse all the theoretical and organisational implications of these demands; but a few points can be made. We can say that to ask for a guaranteed income instead of asking for jobs means to refuse work as the only condition under which we are allowed to live, particularly at a time when American capital is voluntarily expelling large sections of workers from the labor market (as economists put it, 4.5% unemployment is a normal rate for a healthy economy). It means that we refuse to pay the price of capitalist rationalisation: if unemployment and welfarisation are functional to capitalists, they and not we should pay for it.

As for wages for housework, this opens an entirely different and profoundly feminist perspective, for it sees the struggle from the point of view of the most neglected worker, the wageless worker, the housewife. In England this has already provided a ground of struggle for Unsupported Mothers from the Claimants Union - an organisation of unemployed and wageless people (mostly women with children) who subsist on welfare payments from the State.

We must be paid for what we already do instead of being forced either to do another job - as if housework were not work - or to be stigmatised as parasites and dependents, and consequently abandoned to the alimony of a State or a husband. As we said earlier, "We left our 'woman's place' but soon discovered that this place extended wherever we went." For no woman is liberated from dependence and subordination to men when overwhelmingly women are unwaged houseworkers (whatever else we do, we do the dishes).

WOMEN, THE UNIONS AND WORK

Or What is Not to be Done

This is perhaps written as an open letter to women attending this Manchester conference. It is impossible any longer to sit in the protection of a group and see the potential of the movement squandered. This was hastily written, though it represents many years' consideration. It is not meant to be the final word, not even of its author.

There are more ways than one in which the women's movement can be co-opted and be cut off from the possibilities of becoming an autonomous and revolutionary political movement. One is that we will assist capitalism to introduce and integrate women into new facets of its exploitative relations. The FINANCIAL TIMES of March 9, 1971, has made clear to those backward capitalists who have not realised it yet, how useful we can be.

... The thousands of trained girls who come out of the universities every year are desperately anxious to escape from the triple trap of teaching, nursing, or short-hand-typing...

Many of these girls are clearly of high ability, and they constitute a pool from which skilled middle management could be drawn. They would be as hard working and conscientious as only a grateful outsider could be, and it is conceivable that, in spite of the equal pay legislation, they might not cost as much as male equivalents, at least in the first instance. We will use such women, in increasing numbers, when we realise that they exist and feel able to recognise their qualities. Until then, a good deal of talent that is costing a lot of money to train in our universities will continue to be wasted, and British industry will have

failed to see a source of renewed energy and vitality that is before its very eyes.

This use of rebellion, for the purpose of developing capital with "renewed energy and vitality," is not new and not confined to women. For capitalism to co-opt every aspect of struggle, to renew itself with our energy and our vitality, and with the active help of a minority of the exploited, is central to its nature.

The ex-colonial world whom the British "educated" to self-government, for example, is ruled by "grateful outsiders." We need to examine how we are to be "used" closely and carefully if we are to prevent ourselves from organising only to assist capitalism to be less backward and in the process further enslaving ourselves, rather than organising to destroy it which is the only possible process of liberation.

Another, but connected, way of co-option has in some measure already taken place, and its agent has been left organisations. They have effectively convinced many of us that if we wish to move to working class women it must be either through them or, more pervasively, through their definitions of the class, their orientations and their kind of actions. It is as though they have stood blocking an open door. They challenge the validity of an autonomous women's movement either directly or (by treating women, a specially exploited section of the class, as marginal) indirectly. For them the "real" working class is white, male and over thirty. Here racism, male supremacy and age supremacy have a common lineage. They effectively want to make us auxiliary to the "general" struggle - as if they represented the generalisation of the struggle; as if there could be a generalised struggle without women, without men joining with women for women's demands.

A major issue on which we have swallowed their orientation and been co-opted to defeat our own movement has been on the question of unionising women.

We are told that we must bring women to what is called a "trade union consciousness." This phrase is Lenin's and it comes from a pamphlet called What is to be done.^{*} In many ways it is a brilliant pamphlet, but it was written in the early days of the Russian movement, in 1902. Lenin learnt from the workers and peasants of Russia in 1905 and 1917 and repudiated a good deal of what he wrote before these two revolutions. Left people do not speak of Lenin's later conclusions, and in my view much of what passes for left theory (and practice) today is pre-1902. In 1972 this is a serious charge, and I think it can be proved. They can read Lenin and quote him. But unlike Lenin, they are not able to learn from the actions that workers take.

The most obvious recent action is undoubtedly the miners' strike.^{**} I believe many women in the movement have been shaken

* But even this the left has turned on its head. Lenin's point was that the spontaneous workers' movement developed only to the level of "trade union consciousness." The revolutionary party had to bring the workers' movement to revolutionary consciousness. 1) Either the left assumes that even trade union consciousness must be brought to the working class by intellectuals or that women are too backward even to arrive spontaneously at where men workers do. 2) The conception of bringing revolutionary consciousness from outside into the working class was knocked out of Lenin's head first in 1905, then in 1917 and finally in the years that followed; when, among other things, he understood the "spontaneous" fascism which was in the consciousness of petty-bourgeois "socialist" intellectuals. Trotsky understood this about Lenin even if his followers do not. (See Stalin by L. Trotsky, Stein & Day, New York, 1967).

^{**} Strike against National Coal Board, Jan.-Feb., 1972.

by this great working class event. Class action shakes all sections of the population in days or weeks when nothing else has moved them for years. We have all had a leap in consciousness as a result of the action of the class. Therefore what we consider possible is expanded. This is the immediate reason for our restlessness. We are not satisfied any more to stand aside and let the world go by. After three years of our movement, Northern Ireland, Zimbabwe* and then this strike, we want to do something, but not just anything. We want to build a movement which is at once political and new, one which speaks specifically to the needs of women.

But what has been the basis of this tremendous demonstration of power of the class? After all, this is not the first big strike in the recent period in Britain. The postmen, the dustmen, the electricity workers and many others have demonstrated in action their will to fight. What distinguished the miners is that they didn't depend on their unions but on their own self-organisation and methods of struggle. More than once during the strike, the union tried to dictate the terms of struggle. For example, when the union asked workers to man safety crews, or tried to discourage them from violent defence of picket lines, or stood in the way of the women organising independently. But the mining community went its own autonomous way. As a result, it won, among other reasons because in this way it won other workers to its cause.**

This is not the first attempt at autonomous class action, but it is the first major success. Almost every recent national strike has been lost or at least drawn because workers allowed or could not prevent their union from "leading" it. Pilkington is the most striking case. And we must remember that 90% of all strikes are unofficial, either in spite of or against the unions.

* Formerly Rhodesia. The rebellion we refer to prevented the formalization of collaboration between Ian Smith's government and the British government.

** Since this was written, there was in Jan-Feb 1974 an even more hostile confrontation between the mining community, 260,000 of whom are miners, on the one hand, and the government's policy of freezing pay on the other. Again the mining community was able to use the union and not permit the union to use them. It was an entirely successful strike and has set the scene for even wider confrontations between workers (in and out of the home) and the government (Labour or Conservative).

Now at this point, where workers are beginning to wrest from unions control over their own struggle, we are invited to bring women into the unions where they will acquire "trade union consciousness."

What has been the role of trade unions specifically in relation to women?

1. They have helped to maintain unequal rates of pay despite the brave attempts by individual women (and some men) trade unionists to give this issue priority. As a matter of fact, once unions ask for a percentage wage raise, and not the same raise for all, they not only confirm inequality of wages but further widen the gap between men and women - and of course between men and men too. Ten percent of £10=£11. Ten percent of £20=£22. To them that hath a bit more shall be given a bit more...

They have never organised a struggle for equal pay. In the two great equal pay strikes we know about - and there are plenty we don't know about - the women acted independently of the unions. During the Leads seamstresses' strike the union wrote to the company and told them not to give in to the women. The women had to fight two governors by busting the windows of the union offices.

At Dagenham when the seat cover sewers went out, of course there was no attempt by the union to generalise (that is, **bring the men out in support of**) a **strike which took place because the union had turned their backs on the women**. The shop stewards, at the crucial meeting with the Minister of Employment and Productivity, renounced upgrading - which was the demand of the women - and settled for a wage rise which was 8% below the average male pay.

2. Grading is the basis for unequal pay where men and women work together. The unions take for granted job categories which have kept women lower paid and will continue to under the equal pay act.

Even more, they worry that equal pay for women might "disturb" the wage differentials among different grades of men. The GUARDIAN of 6 September 1971 quotes Jack Peel, general secretary of the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers, talking to an employer, one Eric Booth. Eric says, "If we're not careful this could be very expensive for us." But Jack is more far-seeing. He says, "We could easily upset the men; upset their differentials. The way to avoid this is to go gently along." The question of equal pay is not only about the double exploitation of women and young people. It is about the way capital has carved up the whole class into grades and corresponding wage rates so that groups of workers see their interests as different from other groups - for example, men in relation to women.

3. They have not tried very hard to get us into unions. The Night Cleaners* were in the degrading position of having to embarrass the T&G publicly in order to get "taken in." We're not straightforward like men, you see. We have all these problems of kids and husbands and extreme exploitation. They don't really want us in the unions, although the dues are useful and we don't compete for their union jobs.

Yet note: if there are a rash of strikes or sit-ins for equal pay or for anything else, the unions will be falling over backwards to bring women in. What else does capital have to control workers when they move? How else can they get us to participate in our own exploitation? Who else would we trust but an organisation, a movement, formed by us to unite with other workers? And if we are not depending on unions, who else would we depend on but ourselves and other workers? That would be dangerous - for unions and government.

* Women who clean offices at night could not even get Transport & General Workers Union officials to meet them because union offices closed at 5:00 p. m.

It would not be surprising if they were at this moment planning campaigns to recruit women in areas where they have been effectively militant, and planning also to come to our movement for help. Who can do their recruiting among women better than other women!

4. But for those of us who are deprived of wages for our work, who are housewives and do not have jobs outside the home, unions don't know we exist. When capital pays husbands they get two workers, not one. The unions are organisations which are supposed to protect (some) workers in (some) work institutions. Waged workers have organised unions (not the other way round, by the way - workers organise unions, not unions workers) and have organised them to deal with their waged work situation. A housewife's work situation is the home, and every woman who does waged work (except the rich) also does unwaged work, is also a housewife. Yet when husband and father and brother are taking strike decisions which we have to support, we have no part in deciding the kind of action or the issues on which we fight. We get very little for ourselves - if we win, not even some of the credit. Has anybody pointed out how much every strike of men is dependent on the support of women? The unions ensure that the struggle is segregated and women can participate only as auxiliaries. Remember "Salt of the Earth?" In order for the women to be brought actively into the strike and win it, they had to adjourn the union meeting and have a meeting of the whole community instead. That's where it's at, on a national and international level.

5. Until recently the capitalist class with the help of unions had convinced men that if they got a rise in pay they got a rise in standard of living. That's not true, and women always knew it. They give men a pay packet on Friday and take it back from us on Saturday at the supermarket. We have to organise the struggle for the other side of wages - against inflation - and that can only be done outside the unions, first because they only deal with the money

we get and not with what we have immediately to give back; and second because they limit their fight - such as it is - only to that workplace where you get wages for being there, and not where your work involves giving the money back.

It is not simply that they don't organise the shoppers; it is that the union prevents such organisation, by following organisationally the way capital is organised: a fragmented class divided into those who have wages and those who don't. The unemployed, the old, the ill, children and housewives are wageless. So the unions ignore us and thereby separate us from each other and from the waged. That is, they structurally make a generalised struggle impossible. This is not because they are bureaucratised; this is why. Their functions are to mediate the struggle in industry and keep it separate from struggles elsewhere. Because the most concentrated potential power of the class is at the point of production of material commodities, the unions have convinced the wageless that only at that point can a struggle be waged at all. This is not so, and the most striking example has been the organisation of the Black community. Blacks, like women, cannot limit themselves to a struggle in factories. And Blacks, like women, see the function of the union within the class writ large in its relation to them. For racism and sexism are not aberrations of an otherwise powerful working class weapon. They are its nature.

You will see by now that I believe in order to have our own politics we must make our own analysis of women and therefore our own analysis of the whole working class struggle. We have been taking so much for granted that happens to be around, and restricting, segregating ourselves to speaking and writing about women, that it looks like we are only supposed to analyse and understand women after others (men) have analysed the class "in general" - excluding us. This is to be male-dominated in the profoundest sense. Because there is no class "in general" which doesn't include us and all the wageless.

I think that some of us who have refused to relate women's struggle to the class struggle have done this in self-defence, in order to get away from the left analysis of class which left us out completely (and as I have tried to show, was a barrier to men workers carrying out struggle independent of unions).

In turn some women have been forced to stay in or join left organisations and suffer continuous humiliation in them in order not to be disconnected from class politics.

Another result of the denial of an autonomous role for the women's movement has been the women who see themselves only as supportive, this time of women and not of men. If we support women's struggles that is a step forward, but if we make no independent contribution, we are either unwilling or unable to use and share what the movement has caused us to learn. Faced with the elitism of the left, this patronising has seemed to some women the only alternative.

For all these women a feminist movement based on autonomous class politics is the only viable alternative. Until we create that, we will continue to snipe at each other, and always as a reaction to what men are doing.

Now the first thing that will pop into the heads of some of us is the benefit to be derived from unions. There is no doubt that certain slave conditions are done away with when a factory is organised, and usually when workers in factories organise, they organise into unions (or against them). It seems the only alternative to slavery. The whole history of the class is bound up with this institution. But it is the way workers get unions formed, organising together and almost always going on strike, that abolishes the slave conditions, not the unions. It is their power that brings the union in and it is their power that abolishes slave conditions. The union has become

a symbol of this power and has exploited this image and this tradition so as to channel, direct and, where possible, smother the struggle, but the power is the workers'.

Secondly, if you go into a union or a non-union factory or office where both men and women are working, you'll almost always see that the men are not as pressed as the women. Their working speed is slower than women's, they take more time in the toilet to smoke, to breathe. That also has to do, not with unions, but with power: women come into industry less powerful than men, for the obvious reason of their manifold oppression through the patriarchy. But aside from their wagelessness and resulting dependence on men which is the basic use of capitalist patriarchy; and their internalisation of the myth of female incapacity through which this patriarchy is reinforced, there is another factor. They have an actual minority status in industry. They are uncertain not only of their own capacities but of the support they will receive from men and the unions which are now identified primarily with men.

The very structure of the unions puts women off. All those rules and regulations and having to talk at meetings and having meetings at night when we are putting our children to bed and washing up, often confirm to us that we are 'backward.'" We know these feelings well. We formed a movement because of them.

Certainly very few women in jobs or out of them feel the union can represent them as women who have not an eight-hour but at least a 16-hour day.

But if the power of the unions is an expression of the power of the class, and if unions have in essential respects been working against our interests as women and therefore against the working class, then we must organise that power, not those unions. We are in a similar

dilemma with the family of the working class. I would like to quote from a forthcoming document which does not analyse women from the point of view of Marxism, but Marxism from the point of view of women (and therefore I believe of men).*

The working class family is the more difficult point to break because it is the support of the worker, but as worker, and for that reason the support of capital. On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class - but at the woman's expense against the class itself. The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he and she will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of women of the working class against the family is decisive.

The struggle of the woman of the working class against the unions is so decisive because, like the family, it protects "the class" at her expense (and not only hers) and at the expense of offensive action. Like the family, we have nothing to put in its place but the class acting for itself and women as integral, in fact pivotal to that class.

6. Finally there is the question of women and "unemployment." First of all, we know that only rich women are unemployed - that is, do no work. Whether or not we're in jobs, most of us work like hell. The only thing is that we are wageless if we don't formally

* Now published as The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, Falling Wall Press, 79 Richmond Road, Bristol BS6 5EP, England. \$1 post free.

hire ourselves out to a particular capitalist and instead work in our kitchens creating and servicing workers for the capitalist class in general. It is characteristic that the unions and the labour exchanges (i.e. wage slave markets) in Scotland have made a deal not to give jobs to married women. In the explosive situation in Scotland of which the UCS* work-in was merely an indication, they - the unions and the government - figure we can be depended upon not to "give trouble." That is how we have been used all the time, and we have to prove them wrong or fold up. This damn capitalist class and their damn unions must not be able to count on our quiescence any more over anything. They have made this deal over our heads. They will make or have made others. We are expendable.

And when in Scotland we are kept out of the wage-slave market, it is to keep men from being unemployed just at the moment and in the place where the methods of struggle of Northern Ireland may catch on. This move against women by unions and government is probably as a direct result of the attempt men workers made to take over the employment exchange at the same time as the UCS work-in was going on. That is, some workers thought that an unwork-in was a better idea than a work-in. No need to say where the unions stand on this when they are desperately trying to shove "We want jobs" placards into workers' hands. You would think it is immoral to be disengaged from exploitation. The only thing "wrong" with unemployment is that you don't get a pay packet.

And this is the heart of the issue. The government, acting in the interests of the capitalist class in general, has created unemployment in the hope that, instead of fighting for more pay and less work, we will be glad for the crumbs that the master lets fall from his table. So that the "country" can "progress" over our dead and dying minds and bodies. The unions tell us to worry about productivity and exports while the capitalists are busy exporting their

* Upper Clyde shipyards taken over by workers when threatened with its closing down.

capital all over the world, for example to South Africa (and hope, by the way, to export white unemployed workers behind it). The unions are trying to lead exactly the kind of struggle that would make Ted Heath (except for the mining community, the Northern Irish Catholic community and the Zimbabwe community) a happy man: they are demanding jobs. It is the threat of closure of the mines that the government thought would keep the mining community quiet. Instead the people from the mine areas made clear from their strike that they didn't consider spending your life in a mine or scrubbing filthy clothes and nursing people with silicosis was an ideal existence. Their strike meant that they were saying: Take your mines and shove them. They refused to beg for the right to be exploited.

But what about those women who have been deprived of the social experience of socialised work and the relative independence of their own pay packet? It is certainly not as simple in their case. I quote again from Power of Women.

... The role of housewife, behind whose isolation is hidden social labour, must be destroyed. But our alternatives are strictly defined. Up to now, the myth of female incapacity, rooted in this isolated woman dependent on someone else's wage and therefore shaped by someone else's consciousness, has been broken by only one action: the woman getting her own wage, breaking the back of personal economic dependence, making her own independent experience with the world outside the home, performing social labour in a socialised structure, whether the factory or the office, and initiating there her own forms of social rebellion along with the traditional forms of the class. The advent of the women's movement is a rejection of this alternative.

Capital itself is seizing upon the same impetus which created a movement - the rejection by millions of women of woman's traditional place - to recompose the work force with increasing numbers of women. The movement can only develop in opposition to this. It poses by its very existence and must pose with increasing articulation in action that women refuse the myth of liberation through work.

For we have worked enough. We have chopped billions of tons of cotton, washed billions of dishes, scrubbed billions of floors, typed billions of words, wired billions of radio sets, washed billions of diapers, by hand and in machines. Every time they have "let us in" to some traditionally male enclave, it was to find for us a new level of exploitation.

Here again we must make a parallel, different as they are, between underdevelopment in the Third World and underdevelopment in the metropolis - to be more precise, in the kitchens of the metropolis. Capitalist planning proposes to the Third World that it "develop;" that in addition to its present agonies, it too suffer the agony of an industrial counter-revolution. Women in the metropolis have been offered the same "aid." But those of us who have gone out of our homes to work because we had to or for extras or for economic independence have warned the rest: inflation has riveted us to this bloody typing pool or to this assembly line, and in that there is no salvation.

We must refuse the development they are offering us. But the struggle of the working woman is not to return

from the ground up. To think in terms of building organisations without traditions (except the traditions of the struggle itself) is to break from other traditions which, among other things, helped to prevent a revolutionary women's movement for years. Independent organisation - independent of every section of the establishment, is difficult to consider, let alone create, when thousands of women are not in motion.

But the picture is not as gloomy as it appears. There have been dozens if not hundreds of equal pay strikes. The Claimants Union is gaining in strength and has at its core unsupported mothers. And most recently, the women of the mine areas made the first attempt to organise independently. In addition, if we are not blinded by a "trade union consciousness" ourselves, we can see women even in the worst jobs and the most unorganised factories waging their struggle in completely new ways. Here is the DAILY SKETCH, January 18, 1971.

Thousands of girls quit humdrum factory jobs because they get fed up being treated like "robots."

They complain of monotonous work and impersonal bosses.

The girls become frustrated because the jobs they do make little demand on their abilities and leave no room for personal satisfaction.

These were the main points of a survey by Bradford University into why 65 per cent of women quit their jobs in the electronics industry within a few months.

(You see who the universities are working for.)

We are not only victims; we are rebels too. The absenteeism of women is notorious. Instead of workers control of production, their action is more like workers control of the struggle, to hell with their production.

So that the first barrier to independent organisation, the supposed apathy of women, is not what has been assumed. If we begin to look with women's eyes, respecting what women do and not measuring them as men do, we will see a wealth of rebellion against and refusal of women's work and the relationships and roles they generate.

This is not always organised rebellion and refusal. Well then, let's organise it. The unions don't; they sit on its head.

There appear to be two levels of demands, the issues which arise on a local level, and the general demands which the movement comes to stand for. In reality our movement has suffered from an unnatural separation between the two. The Four Demands we marched for last year have been on the whole unconnected with individual group activity (in part at least because of the barrenness of those demands).*

Our concern must be demands with which the movement articulates in few words the breadth of its rejection of the oppression and exploitation of women. The tension between a local struggle and the stated principles of the movement does not vanish but within each local demand, which mobilises women wherever they are, the struggle loses its sporadic, provincial and disconnected character. The demands must raise possibilities of new kinds and areas of action in each local situation from the beginning, and always keep the fundamental issues before our eyes. There is much more to be said about this, but better to move to the proposed demands.

* These were: Equal Pay, Equal Education and Opportunity, 24-hour Nurseries, Free Contraception and Abortion on Demand.

PROPOSED DEMANDS

1. WE DEMAND THE RIGHT TO WORK LESS. A shorter work week for all. Why should anybody work more than 20 hours a week? Housewives are hesitant to ask men after a week of at least 40 grinding hours to see after their own children and their own underwear. Yet women do just that, for themselves and for men. And full-time housewives work eighty or ninety hours a week. When women are threatened with redundancies, the struggle must be for a shorter work week. (Maybe men will take our lead for a change.)

2. WE DEMAND A GUARANTEED INCOME FOR WOMEN AND FOR MEN, WORKING OR NOT WORKING, MARRIED OR NOT. If we raise kids, we have a right to a living wage. The ruling class has glorified motherhood only when there is a pay packet to support it. We work for the capitalist class. Let them pay us, or else we can go to the factories and offices and put our children in their fathers' laps. Let's see if they can make Ford cars and change diapers at the same time. WE DEMAND WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK. All housekeepers are entitled to wages (men too).

3. It is in this context that WE DEMAND CONTROL OF OUR BODIES. If even birth control were free, would that be control? And if we could have free abortions on demand is that control? What about the children we want and can't afford? We are forced to demand abortion and sterilisation as we have been forced to demand jobs. Give us money and give us time, and we'll be in a better position to control our bodies, our minds and our relationships. Free birth control, free abortions for whoever wants them (including our sisters from abroad who are denied even legal abortion - sisterhood is international). WE DEMAND THE RIGHT TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN.

But childbearing is not the only function of our bodies that capital controls. At work we make them do what they don't want to do: repeated jerks on an assembly line, constant sitting or standing,

breathing fumes and dirt. Work is often painful and dangerous. It is always uncomfortable and tiring. After work your body is too numb for you to feel it as something you can enjoy. For this reason it cannot develop sexually. Our physical feeling is further destroyed by the limited kinds of sexuality and the shallow relationships this society promotes, and by the scarcity of times and places where we can make love. Our bodies become a tool for production and reproduction and nothing else.

4. WE DEMAND EQUAL PAY FOR ALL. There is a rate for girls and a rate for boys and a rate for women and a rate for men and a rate for "skilled" and a rate for "unskilled" and a rate in the North and a rate in the South. Whoever works deserves a minimum wage, and that minimum must be the rate of the highest grade.

5. WE DEMAND AN END TO PRICE RISES, including tax, rent, food and clothing. There is a battle brewing on housing. As usual, with tenants' struggles, women are going to be at the heart: they are the ones who will refuse the rent collector when he knocks at the door in a rent strike. But our intervention can help guarantee that the women will also lead it, instead of being confined to making the tea in the back of the hall while the men make speeches in front.

6. WE DEMAND FREE COMMUNITY CONTROLLED NURSERIES AND CHILD CARE. We are entitled to a social existence without having to take another job out of our homes. Mothers too have a right to work less. Young children as well as women are imprisoned in their homes. But we don't want them to go to a State institution instead. Children, women and men must be able to learn from each other and break the ghetto existence to which they are each confined. We will then begin to destroy the State's authority over our children and our possession of them.

In the same way as children are to be wrested from the State, so old people, and the mentally and physically ill must come back to the community's care. We need time and we need money to destroy the prisons in which our children, our grandparents and our sick people are confined.

How do we organise a struggle around these demands? As I say, the Claimants Union* has already begun. But the low level of organisation of women generally means that there is plenty hard work to be done.

We begin by uniting what capital has divided. If men have not yet learnt to support the equal pay fight which we have made, it is because their privileges over us - based on the dubious "privilege" of wage itself - have blinded them to their class interests. They have always paid dearly for not uniting with us, by being thrown out of jobs to be replaced by "cheaper" female labour. We may still have to confront not only employers, unions and government but men too when we want equal pay. Equal pay for all may win them over to demanding equal pay also among themselves as well as with us. The battle for parity** in auto is the class finding its way to just such a struggle.

We can organise with women where they work for wages, where they shop, where they live and work. Women from many industrial estates*** have shopping areas very near where they shop in

* Organisation of unemployed and other wageless people, claiming social security.

** The battle for parity is the struggle of workers in auto throughout Britain to get the same pay. It is an equal pay battle. But the government, the unions and the media guarantee that the phrase "equal pay" be seen as a "woman's" issue rather than the issue of a class of which we happen to be a part. It is called "parity" when it refers to men, "anti-racialism" when it refers to blacks and "equal pay" when it refers to women.

*** Areas completely given over to factories.

their dinner hour. They often live close by. We can begin by leaf-letting in all three places, aiming to organise for their most pressing problems which are hours of work, wages, inflation child care and slavery. Housewives can go to the SS offices* and demand money, as the women and children from the mine areas did - we need not wait for the men to strike, we can ask them to strike to support what we are doing.

It is possible that other women will feel too weak (or we will) to act independently of unions (though our job is to emphasize their potential strength), and there may be pressure on them from many sources - especially employers - for them to go into unions once they take action. At this point it is far from decisive. If we help get them moving on their demands, even what they can get from the unions will be greater. They gain confidence and experience; we all do, together. We can have strikes against inflation, rent rises, shift work for women and for men. We can offer to housewives a social existence other than another job - we can offer them the power of the movement and the struggle itself.

Of course this is much easier said than done, though the situation in this country is changing so rapidly that every day more becomes possible. This is meant to begin a discussion of these possibilities, but on our terms.

Nor is this anything like a complete picture of what is taking place in Britain today (or anywhere else), either among workers, or in board rooms, government offices or TUC headquarters. But it is clear to me and to others too I think that the time to make the leap from all that we have learnt in the small group discussions to political activity has come. We must not allow what we know is the female experience to be translated into the secondhand politics of "trade union consciousness," which has been presented to us as the only viable alternative. Goodbye to all that. When 20% of the

* Social Security Offices - British equivalent of Welfare Offices.

women of a mainly women's factory don't turn up for work on Monday, they are many years beyond the trade union struggle, in fact its mortal enemy. They are struggling not only for better conditions in which to be exploited but against exploitation, against work itself. We in the women's movement should be the last people to believe or act upon the absurd notion that women are incapable of leaping beyond the oppressive institutions which have trapped men. Because we have been ignored and excluded by these institutions it is precisely who are in the position to move beyond them.

One final point. There is a debate that goes on about most of us being middle class. And we are. As the Notting Hill SHREW* put it, to have sisterhood we have to get over the myths that only working class women are oppressed or that only middle class women can know they're oppressed. Some women, let's face it, are only in the movement because capitalism is very backward and leaves women out of government and good paying professions. They will eventually have to decide whether to fit into the plans that capital and the FINANCIAL TIMES have for them. But they must not hold the rest of us back

A hell of a lot of us are fighting capital not because it is backward but because it exists. We are increasingly aware that the oppression of all women has its roots in the indispensable work, in home, in office, in hospital and in factory, that working class women perform for capital, sometimes with low wages, most often without wages. We must get over this guilt about having wall-to-wall carpeting and a "good" education - as if they ever taught us anything except to think like them and act for them. Guilt doesn't build a political movement; it inhibits and exhausts it. For guilt becomes sacrifice and sacrifice becomes either martyrdom or bitterness - or both.

* Monthly publication of the Women's Liberation Workshop, London.

The first step in the process of our liberation at this stage is to make our own independent evaluation of the political situation in this country (and later in the world - with the help of women in other countries) on the basis of what our guts and people like those in the mining areas have told us, and then act on it. Then the fact that we are middle class will not stand in the way of waging the class struggle, but as we women define it and as only we can wage it - for the first time in a generalised way. It will take some time, but then Rome wasn't destroyed in a day.

Selma James

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