

WAGES FOR  
HOUSEWORK  
NOTEBOOKS

# 1

WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

NOTEBOOK NO. 1

WHAT IS WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK?

This pamphlet is edited by the Montreal Power of Women Collective. We are part of an international group of women working around the perspective of wages for housework.

PUBLICATIONS

Women in Struggle # 1

Women in Struggle # 2

(The Women in Struggle series are collections of documents about wages for housework struggles that are taking place on an international scale and affecting every aspect of women's lives. Included in the booklets are political statements, analyses, and leaflets coming out of these struggles).

Wages for Housework Notebooks # 1

Wages for Housework Notebooks # 2

(The Wages for Housework Notebooks are collections of the more theoretical documents about wages for housework. The first two notebooks bring together many of the theoretical articles which have not yet received widespread distribution).

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Women in Struggle # 1 and # 2 were produced by the Toronto Wages for Housework Collective.

Wages for Housework Notebooks # 1 was produced by the Montreal Power of Women Collective

Wages for Housework Notebooks # 2 was produced by the New York Collective

Cover design by Patrice Simister, Toronto.

## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Wages for Housework.....	2
by Giuliana Pompei	
The Perspective of Wages for Housework.....	10
by The Power of Women Collective (London)	
When Wages for Housework Becomes a Perspective.....	12
by Silvia Federici	

## WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

by Giuliana Pompei

Work in the Home

When we began looking around ourselves, as women, one of the main things we discovered was the home, the family structure as a place of specific exploitation of our labour power. In our analysis we must give first place to this private sphere, these domestic walls outside which Marxist class analysis — not to mention the practical activity of the left political organizations in and out of parliament — stops. Inside the home we have discovered our invisible work, the enormous quantity of work that women are forced to perform every day in order to produce and reproduce the labour force, the invisible — because unpaid—foundation upon which the whole pyramid of capitalist accumulation rests.

This work, which consists of having children and taking care of them, feeding a man, keeping him tidy and cheering him up after work, is never presented as such. It is presented as a mission whose fulfillment enriches the personality of the one who carries it out. A woman is a mother, a wife, a daughter; she is loved only if she is willing to work without grumbling in the service of others for hours and hours, Sundays, holidays, and nights. This labour relationship is seen always, and only, in personal terms: it is a personal affair between a woman and the man who has the right to appropriate her labour. It is continually explained to the woman that her world is the family and not society; within the family, therefore, she must express the contradictions involved in the division of labour between men and women, which society imposes on her. The housewife has always been excluded from working class organisations—all she can do is look for individual solutions.

As an individual, for instance, she has to confront continual price increases. When her man's wages are no longer enough for meat she substitutes potato souffle—which takes another hour of work, or she goes to markets and butcher shops far from home to save a few pence on the housekeeping. Inflation is a weapon used by the employers to cancel out wage increases won by the workers. Women, isolated in their homes, have had to bear the main brunt of inflation in terms of more work. Traditional labour movement organisations must share the blame for this fact, which has been a grave source of weakness for the workers' struggle itself.

The material bond that pins us to this work is our dependence on a man's wage. This wage not only pays for many hours of his direct labour, but it also commands other work — that of the woman in the domestic factory — which revolves around that wage. The wealth created is distributed to women through a man's wage, if at all. On this basis a stratification is created among women. This is wrongly interpreted as a real class distinction, whereby a woman's class position — working class or capitalist class — is always determined by the man on whom she depends, as if the definition of class as determined by one's position within specific relationships of production were not valid for women as well as men.

True, the woman who can exchange her services for a bigger slice of the income is greatly privileged: a nice house means less work. It means hot water; it means space to separate someone studying from someone else watching television and both from the one who does the washing; it means the children don't get ill from the damp, etc. If there is not enough money to pay a high rent (and they are all high) it is the woman who has to work like mad every day to put something resembling a full meal on the table, to dress her children so they don't look too different from the others when there are already so many other things that set them apart. Even so, we say that a housewife is in herself always a

3  
proletarian, though her social status varies according to the income of the man she depends on. No one has ever thought that a slave was not a slave if he had a rich master who could guarantee him a higher standard of living than other slaves.

### The Second Job: Work Outside the Home

There are very many women who, to escape the curse of inadequate wages and the isolation of their condition, decide to work outside the home as well. But again their responsibility for the "invisible work" — the continuance of a patriarchal type of production relation — reveals the true face of the "emancipation of women through work." Only a part of this mass of housewives who "choose" double exploitation are taken into production, and then always at the lowest levels; the rest are usually not even counted among the unemployed. Many of those who work outside the home serve as nurses, secretaries, servants; like factory women, they get the worst and lowest-paid jobs. It costs capital nothing to drain us for these jobs and assure our ideological loyalty, since the best school for servility is the family.

An outside job never takes away a woman's responsibilities as a housewife. All women working in production know that they do their heaviest work at home, as d they cannot defend themselves against this. For that matter, even against outside work they manage to organise only slowly and with enormous difficulty, because outside the factory or office there is another clock to punch: the child to be fetched, the shopping and the washing to be done. Here capital has stepped in to relieve us by inventing the system of part-time work. Through this system capital, without too much bother, secures a double advantage for itself: on the one hand, it makes women serve as an underpaid reserve labour force; on the other hand, it makes women serve as an unpaid domestic servant by leaving the institution of the family intact or even reinforced.

In no case can the woman escape the production relationships determined by the fact that she is a woman in a capitalist society. We are all brought up to be able, as soon as the lack of other women makes it necessary, to carry on producing workers at all costs and without protest. Some begin at the age of 12, some go on imagining a bit longer — even till they finish their studies — that they can escape this fate. Some think they can refuse their role at an individual level and some accept to fully at once, only trying not to make too big a mistake in choosing a "master:" a bad choice will cost you your life.

### Capitalist Organisation of Domestic Labour

The face that housework is done in a precapitalist or protocapitalist way in no way means that today it is not capitalist and perfectly functional for a phase of capitalist development in which average social productivity, more than factory productivity, is seen as central. Being able to count on this enormous quantity of unpaid labour — just because it maintains the appearance of unproductive labour, to the point of not even being called work — enormously lowers the cost for capital of producing that fundamental merchandise that is labour power. It also means capital can freely manipulate the labour market to suit its cyclic needs: in response to labour agitation it 1) creates a form of unemployment which goes uncontested because the woman expelled from socially organised production always has housework waiting for her and 2) castrates the workers' capacity for struggle by cutting off or reducing the second family wage.

This will go on as long as housewives continue to function simultaneously as a stratum of the most exploited class and as an element for the containment and control of tensions and conflicts. Prices rise and women face the first consequences: sick people are inadequately cared for and women work to make up for the shortage of medical facilities (before, during and after treatment); neighborhoods turn into unlivable ghettos and only women's work can make them bearable. Only women can absorb the lack of schools, shops, green spaces and

services & general without rebelling. Only they can mediate between society and members of the family to see that the men don't dismantle the factories and burn up the neighborhoods, to see that the old just grumble and don't go mad, that children don't end up under care and that starvation wages go on feeding the family.

The only thing that can make women accept all this is constant blackmail imposed on them by all means: this is the only way of being a woman, those who rebel are going against their "natural role." If one of us feels that she can't manage she is at once made to understand that this is a personal problem which she must solve for herself.

Even the task of assuring the renewal of the labour force, quantitatively and qualitatively, is imposed on women within precise relationships of production. For capital to be able to regulate the flow of workers it is necessary to deprive women of control over their own bodies. This is done by material and ideological instruments whose basic conditions for operation are found within family structure. The capitalist system has always paid much attention to demographic policies as instruments of development, rewarding prolific mothers when "eight million bayonets" were required and sterilising Black women when the uncontrolled growth of the Black proletariat might have led to explosive situations in the ghettos. It is well known that the only development policy which capitalism has to offer the Third World is birth control.

Maternity is the most effective ideological instrument for controlling women; it is the key by which their total adhesion to the system is obtained. By exalting its ideological aspects and masking its social ones, the myth of maternity as a mission continues to hide from women the reality of their condition. The way women conceive and bear children is not at all natural if compared with developments in other sectors of science (space research, transplants, etc.). In 1975, painful childbirth and the dearth of effective contraceptives are signs of the backwardness to which women are relegated in capitalist development.

Women guarantee not only that labour power will be reproduced in the necessary quantity, but also that it will grow up with qualitative characteristics suited to the development of the capitalist system. Children must be educated, at the most malleable age, for the division of labour: they must at once get it clear in their heads that everyone must sell his or her labour power to survive, and that there is no escape from this curse. The reproduction of the labour force is necessary for the continued effectiveness of capital's blackmail in all its forms, from division by job grading, to the exclusion of those who are not productive. Women get the worst of this blackmail — they are always in the lowest job grade, that of a housewife; they are the first to be fired, they have to look after the rejects society encloses in ghettos.

Through the mother, the child at once learns to accept all this as natural; this is the first step in an apprenticeship which later continues at school, in the propaganda of the mass media, etc. It is meant to provide an adaptable labour force which will lend itself to the mechanisms of exploitation.

In the acceptance of this division of the labour force between factory and domestic production, in the acceptance of the separation of women from one another and from other exploited people, lies one of the basic reasons for the weakness of working class organisations.

The most important thing that women have been deprived of is the opportunity to organise against their work. And the left has been partly responsible for this isolation, this lack of opportunity to organise (which is the real source of women's "inferiority"). It has found theoretical justifications for relegating women's problems to the level of a "woman question," in its view such questions are

5  
superstructural and this will be solved by the transformation or revolution of social structures; besides, it says housework is not productive and thus the housewife as such is incapable of struggle, organisation, etc. In the course of the revolution, the left has given exactly the same tasks given them by capital: to feed, keep tidy, and cheer up the revolutionaries, to offer them sexual outlet without too many complications, to bring up the new generation to accent double exploitation as the only possible way to emancipation.

### The Wage Demand

On the basis of this analysis, we must now define the scope and the objectives for women's struggle, which can fully express the revolutionary potential which is maturing as women find their position more and more unbearable.

We have already outlined a preliminary answer (in general terms and still to be checked and refined): we've had enough of this work which every day suffocates us, deforms us and blocks all our relationships with outside reality, this work that locks us in a woman's role. We reject this work and we reject this role. We struggle for all objectives which will reduce our hours of work, which will give us a chance to meet, to organize and increase our strength, which will give us more freedom to start destroying our role in practice.

When we organize to achieve some objective, even a minimal one, we are already in practice rejecting housework. We must go out, we must join with other women, we must discover that our "personal" problems are everyone's problems and that only together can we find the strength to deal with them.

The cost -- which up to now we have borne entirely alone -- of running this complex labour power factory should all be unloaded onto the system.

We want the system to assume the costs of maternity, while we ourselves decide and plan it, because we are sick of having it imposed on us as a "law of nature" or as a "variable quantity" within capitalist planning.

We want the system to build and pay for nurseries, kindergartens, canteens and centralised cleaning and laundry services, etc.

We want free housing -- which means not only removing the rent item from our already meagre budgets -- ~~----- all for us it means less work than we have to do today~~ in order to make two small rooms into a home for a whole family. We want greenery, gardens and parks in every part of the city -- which means not spending two or more hours a day taking the children out to break and play. We want lower prices -- which means less work cooking, going to distant markets to save a few pennies, etc.

All this is a wage demand -- we want to capture a bigger slice of real wealth -- in terms of houses, green spaces, free services, etc. -- compared with that which we manage to pay ourselves today out of a man's wages. And this increased real wealth, this greater availability of goods and services which we demand as the minimum compensation for all the unpaid work we have on our shoulders, we intend to enjoy: what we want is not to become more productive, not to go off and be exploited better somewhere else, but to work less and to have more opportunity for social and political experience.

Precisely because the fight for free social services is already essentially a wage demand, we see no contradiction between this struggle and the struggle based on a demand for direct wages for housework the work we are doing now and will go on doing even if tomorrow we win our fight for a reduction in hours and workload.



Social services are not the ultimate objective of our struggle: still less do they offer a real alternative to the exploited situation we are immersed in. Even if we get wages for shit work it is still shit work. However, such concessions will not be handed to us on a platter -- they can only be won by hard fighting at a high level of organisation. And they should be seen as a victory: the conquest of our battleground and better conditions in which to broaden and build our struggle. Can we begin to reject our role -- for example, by not getting married and not having children -- when for many of us the only guarantee of income is still a man's wage?

Can we start talking about educational standards, relations between adults and children in this society, if even the bricks and mortar of nurseries do not exist?

Can we have time for autonomous political growth if domestic work continues to eat up 12 hours or more a day and if we cannot get at least part of it done outside the home?

### The Wage Demand and the Struggle for Social Services

Once we have pointed out that the wage struggle does not contradict but actually includes the fight for free social services, since these reduce our hours of work, we at once come up against some considerations suggested by the immediate reality of women's condition.

1. The right to be paid for the work one does is something which immediately affects all women, even those who don't figure in the statistics as housewives, even those who are not wives or mothers: the girl living at home who studies or works, but who is always expected to "give a hand" at home; the "independent" woman with her own income who sooner or later is lumbered with the care of the old, if no other else; the elderly woman who wears out the last years of her life looking after the children of a younger woman who is thus "freed" for factory work; the woman whose man is "understanding" and ready to help but always makes it clear that by rights she ought to be doing the work, and so on.

2. The demand for wages is a demand for independence. No matter how many services we manage to win, no matter how much more free time we gain in this way, until we win our own incomes and thus break the bond of economic dependence on a man -- whether husband or father -- how can we form the relationships we want, decide if we want to get married or not, to have children or not? How can we control our own lives? How many women are unable to leave their husbands today and get divorced tomorrow because, although they have worked all their lives, they cannot support themselves and their children?

3. The demand for wages has in itself a big ideological impact. We are looking at our work in a new way. We have been taught to see that our work is an expression of our femininity, in which, we are told, our finest quality -- generosity -- is fully expressed in giving others security and serenity. The fact that we now see that work as a socially necessary activity, which must be paid for just like the work our fathers, husbands, and sons do outside the home is already a big step towards achieving an attitude of detachment, towards destroying that "naturally" fixed role which society assigns us at birth.

### The Power of Women

When we put forward the perspective of wages for women, we have in mind certain high points of the class struggle in and out of Italy, We see the phenomenon -- of vaster dimensions in the U.S. but present also in England --- of a massive demand for income by whole working class strata -- women, youth, Blacks -- who in the ups and downs of the economic cycle have been exploited at the lowest levels, and expelled and pushed aside from the productive process,

and who are now fighting this exclusion by a real assault on the agencies of public assistance.

There are 13 million Americans who ought to be getting social security subsistence payments. Since the explosion of public assistance rolls in 1958-1959 in the U.S., women without husbands and with children to support have been in the forefront of the fight for wages without a job outside the home. To this degree that these women struggled they ceased to perform their function of shock absorbers between the proletariat and the forces of repression. The sociologists noticed the new subversive role of women after the ghetto revolts; they finally discovered that the "authority" of the family over young people was "decreasing", which is a twisted way of saying that the family no longer stood between these young people and their own interests and struggles.

In Italy, in just this phase of capitalist attack on employment levels, we have seen a series of struggles in the factory for a guaranteed wage (for example: Zanussi, Candy, Oreal, Lagostina, and many others). The demand for a guaranteed wage is even advanced, though secondarily, in the platform of the engineering union. The wage demand has also emerged in some strata of the working class which have been hit by restructuring and made redundant. In the student movement the demand for wages, in the indirect form of refusal to pay costs of acquiring skills, has been one of the focal points for mobilisation.

The most interesting data for analysis of the composition of the overall female labour force in Italy are not so much the total numbers (at present only 19% of women "work"; there are probably about 10 million housewives), but rather the figures relating to mobility (according to ISTAT data for 1970 and 1971):

48% of women without jobs have left work for family reasons; one million women were fired or expelled from agriculture.

1,600,000 women have had a job in the last five years.

1,600,000 domestic: of whom the overwhelming majority are women workers

What conclusions can be drawn from these summary data?

1. That the "housewife" has probably not always been exclusively a housewife. That a large percentage of the more than 10 million housewives not only have always done and continue to do their "invisible" work, but on top of that they have done and continue to do a second job outside the home. A woman goes into a factory and then leaves (either for "family reasons" or because the factory closes), she does seasonal work (eg. female employment in agriculture, the food industry, canning, etc.), she arranges in a thousand ways to fill out the family income. Even when she can no longer get out of the house she brings the factory home where she does piece-work, makes a contract with a middle man and accents the living death of home-work.

2. That in the "housewife" we can see a figure representing a whole class stratum, who on the whole have already felt the burden of the double job regime on her own back, and will probably be less and less willing to adapt herself to the cyclic changes which today relegate her to the ghetto of the home and which tomorrow will again order her into the factories and offices with a double workload. The current tendency towards increasing expulsion of women workers does not seem likely to reverse itself in the near future. In view of this fact it seems likely that the social figure of the housewife who represents an ever-increasing slice of the female population -- can be mobilised much more readily by a demand for wages for the work she already does, a demand for income than by a generic request to support the Communist Party's full employment policy-- to ally herself with a struggle to defend and extend opportunities toward.

On the other hand, at a time when capital has been forced by workers'

struggles to respond in certain areas with inflation or with "stagnation" (drop in investments, reduction of employment), the only way we see of positively affirming the workers' interests is to make capital pay the highest possible cost for unemployment and expulsion: give us a guaranteed income and pay us wages for housework.

Of course, as a demand of marginal strata capital has already taken account of this, in Italy there is Piccoli's proposal for a guaranteed wage for workers made redundant by modernisation. These "concessions" are two-faced: on the one hand they open an arena for widening struggle (for example, see the pressure in the U.S. for public assistance funds well beyond the simple unemployment benefit), and on the other they are an attempt to create a welfare ghetto in which to segregate certain strata of workers and set them against those in employment.

This attempt can only be fought by linking the struggles of the unemployed, students, women, and employed workers. Yes, a demand for income, but connected with a drastic reduction in hours for all. When the struggle for a 20 hour week becomes general, even if it is called a struggle for employment, then we'll say okay, we don't see any contradiction between this and the rejection of work. Then we will say -- as women -- that we intend to bring into that struggle our specific interest in sharing with men all the work and the "joys" of maternity. Only on this material base can the destruction of feminine and masculine roles, and of the institution of the family, become a concrete prospect.

It is precisely within the process of class reintegration that we see the function of a militant feminist movement: because we see not only the division between laborers and technicians, workers and students, white and Black workers, but also the more profound and radical opposition of the sexes, as a formidable weapon in the hands of capital for the fragmentation and control of the working class.

We assert that as long as men are set against women by their role as instruments and immediate recipients of women's servile labour, as long as women's unpaid labour works as a brake and a form of blackmail on the capacity for struggle of women and men, the system can be sure of a basic guarantee of equilibrium and a wide margin for manoeuvre to reabsorb the conquests of the working class.

Therefore a period of independent organisation of women, we can't tell for how long, it necessary: we need to win our identity, to define the forms and objectives of our struggle, to assure that these struggles will effectively strike at these mechanisms of stabilisation and equilibrium of the system which only we could discover as fundamentals because only we feel their full negative force in a material way: the family, feminine and masculine roles, procreation. To confirm what we have said we can observe the wholly ideological and transitory character which the anti-authoritarian theme (criticism of the family, roles, etc.) has assumed in the student movement and the new left. Ideological and transitory because materially men get a lot of privileges from these structures and their criticism on this plane cannot be radical; this analysis could be extended to the different theories of non-repressive education and also to so-called sexual freedom. These theories did not come from women and indeed have been finally turned against them, pinning them more effectively to their role; this reveals their essentially conservative character.

In the condition of women today, we have identified some of the most explosive areas of contradiction: we have begun to struggle for wages for housework, to demand an income. This demand is being put forward at a stage when capital is planning increasingly massive reductions in women's employment and thus ever-greater exploitation of women's work. In itself this demand represents a step

towards a reunifying of the working class; it means setting in motion women's struggles that will weigh massively on the power relationships between the working class and capital.

The those who go on asking us to join them as allies, or worse, as subordinate auxiliaries, of already existing organisations, we must reply that not only have they failed to understand the order of the day which we, as women, propose through the feminist movement, but they show that they have repressed the new forms of organisation and the opportunities which are emerging from the political level and the new content of workers' and students' struggles in recent years.

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It should be noted that the increasing unemployment of women referred to in this article by Pompei is only one side of capital's plan for women. It in no way contradicts the efforts of capital in other areas of the world to re-compose the working class with increased numbers of women who are then paid lower wages than the men they replace. At different times and in different places, capital attempts to extend its power and weaken the working class in different ways -- in this case by setting men and women in competition with each other for jobs. Our task becomes finding ways of increasing our own power by uniting the entire working class. Pompei suggests demanding wages for housework and linking it to a demand for a drastic reduction in the hours of work for everyone. In this way, waged workers would have a common interest with demands of the wageless for a wage.

## THE PERSPECTIVE OF WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

The Power of Women Collective, London, England

We in the Power of Women Collective, who are organising on wages for housework, base our perspective on the unwaged condition of the housewife. Her condition is the lowest common denominator for all women; through it we are all defined and imprisoned, Black and white, working class and middle class, "supported" and "unsupported", unwaged and partially waged. We begin with the housewife because her unwaged condition is our fundamental weakness. If this unwaged condition is our basic weakness, our perspective must deal with that. While the discussion in our small groups has always centred on the family and the woman's role within it, this fact has not been reflected in the politics or the organisational practice of our movement. The perspective of wages for housework does that for the first time. It aims at power for women to destroy their dependence on men and therefore to destroy their destiny as housewives.

We are not proposing, as others do, that the alternative to housework is factory work. These are two aspects of forced labour which we have to do because we need the money that capital gives us, either directly or through men, in order to live. This money we can get only by working in the home or out of it, but it is not payment for that work. It is just enough to subsist on so that we can continue to do that work. When we demand wages for housework what we are saying is that we need the money and we don't need the work. We are not proposing a productivity deal; we are not a trade union.

The question has come up that if we get paid for housework we will have to do it thoroughly and put up with time and motion study men (or women). The fact that so many people raise this question shows that they see the struggle against housework as different from the struggle against factory work. Or maybe it is because they can't imagine that women could make as anti-capitalist a struggle as men. For example, when factory workers demand a wage increase, they know they'll be offered a productivity deal. Everybody says: go for more money and less work at the same time. That's what we as women propose to do.

The same principle applies to the question of where the money is to come from. We would never tell factory workers not to demand more money because capital will try to get it back from other workers. We say, as wage earners say, let it come from profits.

The struggle for liberation is the struggle for power. Does anyone believe that if we are strong enough to demand and win a wage for housework that when the time and motion study men (or women) knocks at the door, any of us will let him in? In a rent strike when the collector comes he gets the door slammed in his face.

But we are not sold on one way of demanding wages for housework. There are many ways that the demand can be expressed. If we organise a creche in our street and demand that the council pay for it, that is wages for housework.

In fact, there is no part of a woman's life which is not founded in women's wagelessness in the home and therefore no place where a struggle for money can't be made. The perspective of wages for housework uncovers the woman's complete work week, in the factory and in the kitchen. The fragmented life of a woman with its seemingly separate compartments is for the first time seen as a totality through the perspective of wages for housework. For example, we want control over our bodies. But this control is the power to demand birth control that works, that doesn't pollute our bodies, having children when we want them without deeming us to dependence on a man and to slavery in

the home, and being able to raise children without constant financial worry and housing crisis, without having to be confined to heterosexuality, without having our arms and legs trained to follow the rhythms of an assembly line. "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." (-Women, the Unions and Work or What is Not to be Done, p. 18, by Selma James)

To demand money is to determine the grounds of the struggle. We agree with Marx that money is "universal social power" and this the ruling class knows as well as we do. In the context of demanding a wage, we're in a stronger position to get the work off our backs, and in a stronger position too to determine the terms on which this work is socialised. We don't want capitalism to socialise housework as it has socialised factory work and as it is socialising childcare. We're fighting to socialise housework on our terms, not in order to take another job outside the home. The free time we win belongs to us.

The struggle for a wage for housework is the struggle to work less in the factory as well as in the home. It is because so much of her work is unwaged that the woman is in such a weak position in the factory. Women get lower wages because for housework they get no wage: there are always women at home desperate for a wage, however low. Women get lower wages because housework saps their time and energy to fight for higher wages. Women get lower wages because the men they work with think of them as their husbands do, as dependent, incapable, ignorant -- "housewives."

Some people say that women's work in the home is not productive and therefore they should not get a wage. We believe that women's work in the home is productive in the Marxist sense. Some of us are doing research to show that this is the case. But our perspective of wages for housework, as we have tried to show, doesn't depend on whether or not women create surplus value. We repeat: we are not looking for a productivity deal -- as much wages for so much surplus value. Our struggle is based on our need for money, on our need for power, on our need to undermine the power of men over us, to undermine the power of capital over us, and over men and children.

by Silvia Federici

Many times the difficulties and ambiguities which women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the reduction of wages for housework to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective. The difference between these two standpoints is enormous. To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society.

When we view wages for housework in this reductive way we start asking ourselves: what difference could some more money make to our lives? We might even agree that for a lot of women who do not have any choice except for housework and marriage, it would indeed make a lot of difference. But for those of us who seem to have other choices--professional work, enlightened husband, communal way of life, gay relations or a combination of these--it would not make much of a difference at all. For us there are supposedly other ways of achieving economic independence, and the last thing we want is to get it by identifying ourselves as housewives, a fate which we all agree is, so to speak, worse than death. The problem with this position is that in our imagination we usually add a bit of money to the shitty lives we have now and then ask: so what? on the false premise that we could ever get that money without at the same time revolutionising--in the process of struggling for it--all our family and social relations. But if we take wages for housework as a political perspective, we can see that struggling for it is going to produce a revolution in our lives and in our social power as women. It is also clear that if we think we do not need that money, it is because we have accepted the particular forms of prostitution of body and mind by which we get the money to hide that need. As I will try to show, not only is wages for housework a revolutionary perspective, but it is the only revolutionary perspective from a feminist viewpoint and ultimately for the entire working class.

#### "A Labour of Love"

It is important to recognize that when we speak of housework we are not speaking of a job as other jobs, but we are speaking of the most pervasive manipulation, the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class. True, under capitalism every worker is manipulated and exploited and his/her relation to capital is totally mystified. The wage gives the impression of a fair deal: you work and you get paid, hence you and your boss are equal; while in reality the wage, rather than paying for the work you do hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit. But the wage at least recognizes that you are a worker, and you can bargain and struggle around and against the terms and the quantity of that wage, the terms and the quantity of that work. To have a wage means to be part of a social contract, and there is no doubt concerning its meaning: you work, not because you like

it, or because it comes naturally to you, but because it is the only condition under which you are allowed to live. But exploited as you might be, you are not that work. Today you are a postman, tomorrow a cabdriver. All that matters is how much of the work you have to do and how much of that money you can get.

But in the case of housework the situation is qualitatively different. The difference lies in the fact that not only has housework been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework had to be transformed into a natural attribute rather than be recognised as a social contract because from the beginning of capital's schemes for women this work was destined to be unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity to make us accept our unwaged work. In its turn, the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it, except in the privatised kitchen-bedroom quarrel that all society agrees to ridicule, thereby further reducing the protagonist of a struggle. We are seen as nagging bitches, not workers in struggle.

Yet just how natural it is to be a housewife is shown by the fact that it takes at least twenty years of socialisation--day to day training, performed by an unwaged mother--to prepare a woman for this role, to convince her that children and husband are the best she can expect from life. Even so, it hardly succeeds. No matter how well trained we are, few are the women who do not feel cheated when the wedding day is over and they find themselves in front of a dirty sink. Many of us still have the illusion that we marry for love. A lot of us recognise that we marry for money and security; but it is time to make it clear that while the love or money involved is very little, the work which awaits us is enormous. This is why older women always tell us "Enjoy your freedom while you can, buy whatever you want now..." But unfortunately it is almost impossible to enjoy any freedom if from the earliest days of life you are trained to be docile, subservient, dependent and most important to sacrifice yourself and even to get pleasure from it. If you don't like it, it is your problem, your failure, your guilt, your abnormality.

We must admit that capital has been very successful in hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women. By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone. First of all, it has got a hold of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life (the magic words: "yes, darling, you are a real woman"). At the same time, it has disciplined the male worker also, by making his woman dependent on his work and his wage, and trapped him in this discipline by giving him a servant after he himself has done so much serving at the factory or the office. In fact, our role as women is to be the unwaged but happy, and most of all loving, servants of the "working class," i.e. those strata of the proletariat to which capital was forced to



grant more social power. In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally, and sexually--to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time invisible. It is not an accident that most men start thinking of getting married as soon as they get their first job. This is not only because now they can afford it, but because having somebody at home who takes care of you is the only condition not to go crazy after a day spent on an assembly line or at a desk. Every woman knows that this is what she should be doing to be a true woman and have a "successful" marriage. And in this case too, the poorer the family the higher the enslavement of the woman, and not simply because of the monetary situation. In fact capital has a dual policy, one for the middle class and one for the proletarian family. It is no accident that we find the most unsophisticated machismo in the working class family: the more blows the man gets at work the more his wife must be trained to absorb them, the more he is allowed to recover his ego at his expense--beating your wife and venting your rage against her when you are frustrated or overtired by your work or when you are defeated in a struggle--but to go into a factory is itself a defeat. The more the man serves and is bossed around, the more he bosses around. A man's home is his castle...and his wife has to learn to wait in silence when he is moody, to put him back together when he is broken down and swears at the world, to turn around in bed when he says "I'm too tired tonight," or when he goes so fast at lovemaking that, as one woman put it, he might as well make it with a mayonnaise jar. (Women have always found ways of fighting back, or getting back at them, but always in an isolated and privatised way. The problem, then, becomes how to bring this struggle out of the kitchen and bedroom and into the streets.)

### We Are All Housewives

This fraud that goes under the name of love and marriage affects all of us, even if we are not married, because once housework was totally naturalised and sexualised, once it became a feminine attribute, all of us as females are characterised by it. If it is natural to do certain things, then all women are expected to do them and even like doing them--even those women who, due to their social position, could escape some of that work or most of it (their husbands can afford maids and shrinks and other forms of relaxation and amusement). We might not serve one man, but we are all in a servant relation with respect to the whole male world. This is why to be called a female is such a putdown, such a degrading thing. ("Smile, honey, what's the matter with you?" is something every man feels entitled to ask you, whether he is your husband, or the man who takes your ticket, or your boss at work.)

The Revolutionary Perspective

If we start from this analysis we can see the revolutionary implications of the demand for wages for housework. It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore, to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us.

To ask for wages for housework will by itself undermine the expectations society has of us, since these expectations--the essence of our socialization--are all functions to our wageless condition in the home. In this sense, it is absurd to compare the struggle of women for wages to the struggle of the male workers in the factory for more wages. The waged worker in struggling for more wages challenges his social role but remains within it. When we struggle for wages we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role. In the same way there is a qualitative difference between the struggles of the waged worker and the struggles of the slave for a wage against that slavery. It should be clear, however, that when we struggle for a wage we do not struggle to enter capitalist relations, because we have never been out of them. We struggle to break capital's plan for women, which is an essential moment of that planned division of labour and social power within the working class, through which capital has been able to maintain its power. Wages for housework, then, is a revolutionary demand not because by itself it destroys capital, but because it attacks capital and forces it to restructure social relations in terms more favorable to us and consequently more favorable to the unity of the class. In fact, to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and in its more insidious character as femininity. Against any accusation of "economism" we should remember that money is capital, i.e. it is the power to command labour. Therefore to reappropriate that money which is the fruit of our labour--of our mothers' and grandmothers' labour--means at the same time to undermine capital's power to command fore labour from us. And we should not distrust the power of the wage in demystifying our femaleness and making visible our work--our femaleness as work--since the lack of a wage has been so powerful in shaping this role and hiding our work. To demand wages for housework is to make it visible that our minds, bodies and emotions have all been distorted for a specific function, in a specific function, and then have been thrown back at us as a model to which we should all conform if we want to be accepted as women in this society.

To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking. At the same time, it shows that we have cooked, smiled, fucked

throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice. Our faces have become distorted from so much smiling our feelings have got lost from so much loving, our oversexualisation has left us completely desexualised.

Wages for housework is only the beginning, but its message is clear: from now on they have to pay us because as females we do not guarantee anything any longer. We have to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create what will be our sexuality which we have never known. And from the viewpoint of work we can ask not one wage but many wages, because we have been forced into many jobs at once. We are housemaids, prostitutes, nurses, shrinks; this is the essence of the "heroic" woman who is celebrated on "Mother's Day". We say: stop celebrating our exploitation, our supposed heroism. From now on we want money for each moment of it, so that we can refuse some of it and eventually all of it. In this respect nothing can be more effective than to show that our female virtues have a calculable money value, until today only for capital, increased in the measure that we were defeated; from now on against capital for us in the measure we organise our power.

### The Struggle for Social Services

This is the most radical perspective we can adopt because although we can ask for everything, day care, equal pay, free laundromats, we will never achieve any real change unless we attack our female role at its roots. Our struggle for social services, i.e. for better working conditions, will always be frustrated if we do not first establish our work is work. Unless we struggle against the totality of it we will never achieve victories with respect to any of its moments. We will fail in the struggle for the free laundromats unless we first struggle against the fact that we cannot love except at the price of endless work, which day after day cripples our bodies, our sexuality, our social relations, unless we first escape the blackmail whereby our need to give and receive affection is turned against us as a work duty for which we constantly feel resentful of our husbands, children and friends, and guilty for that resentment. Getting a second job does not change that role, as years and years of female work outside the house stiffen our witness. The second job not only increases our exploitation, but simply reproduces our role in different forms. Wherever we turn we can see that the jobs women perform are mere extensions of the housewife condition in all its implications. That is not only become nurses, maids, teachers, secretaries -- all functions for which we are well trained in the home -- but we are in the same bind that hinders our struggles in the home: isolation, the fact that other people's lives depend on us, or the impossibility to see where our work begins and ends, where our work ends and our desires begin. Is bringing coffee to your boss and chatting with him about his marital problems secretarial work or is it a personal favour? Is the fact that we have to worry about our looks on the job a condition of work or is it the result of female vanity? (Until recently hostesses in the United States were periodically weighed and had to be constantly on a diet -- a torture that all women know -- for fear of being laid off).

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As is often said -- when the needs of the waged labour market require her presence there -- "A woman can do any job without losing her femininity", which simply means that no matter what you do you are still a cunt.

As for the proposal of socialisation and collectivisation of housework, a couple of examples will be sufficient to draw a line between these alternatives and our perspective. It is one thing to set up a day care the way we want it, and demand that the State pay for it. It is quite another thing to deliver our children to the State and ask the State to control them, discipline them, teach them to honour the American flag not for five hours, but for fifteen or twenty-four hours. It is one thing to organise communally the way we want to eat (by ourselves, in groups, etc.) and then ask the State to pay for it, and it is the opposite thing to ask the State to organise our meals. In one case we regain some control over our lives, in the other we extend the State's control over us.

### The Struggle Against Housework

Some women say: how is wages for housework going to change the attitudes of our husbands towards us? Won't our husbands still expect the same duties as before and even more than before once we are paid for them? But these women do not see that they can expect so much from us precisely because we are not paid for our work, because they assume that it is "a woman's thing" which does not cost us much effort. Men are able to accept our services and take pleasure in them because they presume that housework is easy for us, that we enjoy it because we do it for their love. They actually expect to be grateful because by marrying us or living with us they have given us the opportunity to express ourselves as women (i.e. to serve them), "You are lucky you have found a man like me". Only when men see our work as work -- our love as work -- and most important our determination to refuse both, will they change their attitude towards us. When hundreds and thousands of women are in the streets saying that endless cleaning, being always emotionally available, fucking at command for fear of losing our jobs is hard, hated work which wastes our lives, then they will be scared and undermined as men. But this is the best thing that can happen from their own point of view, because by exposing the way capital has kept us divided (capital has disciplined them through us and us through them -- each other, against each other), we - their crutches, their slaves, their chains - open the process of their liberation. In this sense wages for housework will be much more educational than trying to prove that we can work as well as them, that we can do the same jobs. We leave this worthless effort to the "career woman", the woman who escapes from her oppression not through the power of unity and struggle, but through the power of the master, the power to oppress -- usually other women. And we don't have to prove that we can "break the blue collar barrier". A lot of us broke that barrier a long time ago and have discovered that the overalls did not give us more power than the apron; if possible even less, because now we had to wear both and had less time and energy to