

The Unpaid Shift

HOUSEWORK is one of the pillars of women's oppression. We service, worry about and look after others physically, emotionally and sexually. It is our responsibilities as housewives which determine the sorts of jobs we can get and the amount of time we have for workplace organising.

Our struggle against the sexual division of labour and lack of financial independence is central to the building of women's power. It should also have wider repercussions, since socialists must challenge the false division between home and work. This means the struggle in the community cannot take second place to the struggles at work, for capitalism and the state have extended their control to both areas.

Women in the community — fulltime housewives — have proved that when we organise collectively we can build our strength, break down loneliness and isolation, improve living and working conditions, and begin to win some control over our own lives.

We are realising we can speak for ourselves. Our passivity, lack of confidence, preoccupation with 'trivial' things, our dependence on men isn't natural. It's part of the conditioning we get to make sure we don't break our contract in this class-ridden, male-dominated society.

After all, if you spend 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, keeping house, looking after children and trying to make ends meet, you're bound to know more about where to get the cheapest bacon than about the struggle in Afghanistan. After all, Karl Marx didn't write 'Das Kapital' in the bagwash!

STATE CONTROL

We also have to fight the way in which the State controls all areas of our social life through the Welfare State and housing policy. After the war State spending in the public sector became the largest source of employment in this country. State grants determine where industries should be sited; certain industries were nationalised; welfare benefits (and their strings) increased; the NHS and the education system were developed.

It is true to say that the working class fought for certain elements of this Welfare State, but we didn't reckon with a paternalistic power out of our control; imposing conditions on rents, gas and electricity, influencing our social and personal behaviour through schools, cohabitation rules and so on.

The battle in the community over spending cuts is often between the women and the local council, like Val's damp group described later in this section. The councils try and shift more work and responsibility onto the women. When we fight for road safety barriers, the council says it's the mothers' responsibility to stop the kids from getting killed on the road.

REBELLIOUS COMMUNITY

On Tower Hill (a working-class overspill estate outside Liverpool) in 1972, a well-organized and rebellious community formed itself to struggle against the Tory 'fair rent' act. Big Flame women worked with women on the estate throughout the rent strike to build a women's group within the Tenants Action Group.

The strike on that particular estate lasted till 1974 and some Big Flame comrades moved to live there, to attempt to continue the work and develop the relationships they had built up during the rent strike. It was our first consistent attempt to build a factory-community link.

We produced a bulletin with other activists on the estate, aimed at women who both lived on the estate and also worked in the small factories in the



MARK RUSHER (IFL)

surrounding industrial estate. We worked within the Action Group which reformed itself at different times to deal with such things as provision of safety barriers, threat to the free school bus service, threats of eviction, and support for squatters. We are still working with other local people on issues like the cuts, anti-racism and Troops Out.

But women's struggle can't be compartmentalised. We have to be strong in every area of our lives. So we have always identified very strongly with the Women's Liberation Movement, and tried to see how to link that movement with what we defined as the wider 'Women's Movement' of all women who are fighting to change their lives.



SALLY AND RICHARD GREENHILL

Stroppy Woman

Val is the secretary of a local tenants group in Leeds.

The first complaint about the damp in the houses on our estate was made by a couple 28 years ago. I've been reporting it myself for 8 years. When we first reported it, the council told us to 'turn on the central heating full and open all the windows.' There are 40 disconnections a day already in Leeds. If we did what the council advises, there'd be a damnsight more. There's an old couple on our street. She's 89 and has arthritis and bronchitis and her house is so damp that her slippers have green mould on their soles.

Small tenants groups started spontaneously in each street. We'd all got the same complaint; we'd all been reporting

the damp and asking had been done. One woman was told, 'Don't fry chips, and don't wash clothes or boil water in the kitchen.' What was she meant to do, camp in the garden?

A lot of people on our estate are on social security and have rent arrears. They felt they weren't entitled to fight for their rights. We put out 2,000 questionnaires on the estate and eventually called our first public meeting to launch the campaign. We did a large survey which we called 'Life in a Paper Bag', and we've participated in local area housing meetings, demonstrations and a t.v. programme. Harassing the council is the only way. We'll keep up the pressure because there are other local damp groups, and we're all coming together. Leeds tenants don't need tranquillizers to relieve our

depression — we need healthy, damp-free houses.

For the women on the estate it's difficult to get out for meetings and demonstrations when you've got kids. It takes an enormous effort but all the regular militants in the tenants group are women. We're getting along great, and we've lots of ideas. We're working on a cartoon film on damp and some of the ideas are marvellous. Come the winter when the damp gets so bad, we'll be really strong.

Getting involved like this has made me a different person. It makes the world seem so much larger. I no longer feel isolated because there are so many of us all fighting for the same changes.

I was a horrible vegetable and now I'm a stroppy woman!

Why isn't everyone a communist?

Brenda was a nurse and has been in Big Flame for four years.

I have lived in Manchester all my life. We lived in a terraced house, my father was a fitter for British Rail. I passed for a grammar school, but my parents did not think education was for girls, so I went to the secondary school.

I always wanted to be a nurse, but my mother didn't approve of nursing and she didn't think I would match up to the discipline, so I got a job in an office for two years. Eventually I applied for nursing in 1956 and forged my mother's signature. I saw nursing as a vocation, and this was drummed into me from the beginning. I was always out enjoying myself. We all started courting and I drifted into getting married, although I felt it wasn't for me. My husband was jealous of nursing and made me leave hospital nursing, so I went to do industrial nursing.

I had always wanted children but I had a hysterectomy at 27. So when I got my home together I started to try and adopt a child. All the adoption lists were closed because of oral contraception and the 1967 abortion law, which at the time made me anti-abortion. So I agreed to adopt a child with either a medical condition or of mixed parentage. Julian, who I adopted, is Anglo-Chinese with a medical condition, although he is now a very healthy child.

I worked on night duty three nights a week at Tameside General while Julian was small. My marriage broke up when Julian was three years old. This left me very isolated and I lost my circle of friends, because I was seen as a potential husband stealer. I was also struggling financially because nurses' wages were very low, and you don't get paid when you are off with sick children. At this time I started to become more aware of problems facing women, especially single parents.

FIRST ACTION

In 1974 the Hallsbury campaign for nurses' pay began. I had been in COHSE since starting work, but this was my first action. Nothing much was happening at my hospital, so I became branch secretary and organized street meetings in support of our claim.

This led me to join the Labour Party, which I saw as the party for workers. I became a delegate to Tameside Trades Council, and began organizing the fight for comprehensive education. In 1975 we were also experiencing the first round of cuts in public spending. I put a resolution to my Labour Party branch to oppose the cuts and affiliate to the local cuts committee. When this was defeated I stopped being active in the Labour Party.

I was beginning to read literature put out by socialist groups. I read



a copy of the newspaper *Big Flame* and related very strongly to its politics. Before that I hadn't considered myself a socialist but I thought — I must be, because I agree with this.

By chance I came across a member of *Big Flame* and joined at the end of 1976. On joining *Big Flame* I began to realise that feminist politics were important and that my view on abortion had been selfish. I started organizing in Tameside NAC. I was also better able to cope with pushing for women's involvement in unions, after I had been booed off the platform at COHSE Conference earlier that year for pushing for more women officers.

CHANGING DEMANDS

These changes in my life meant a lot more demands on my time and I had very little social life. When I did go out with old mates, I didn't get on with them very well, and could no longer accept going out just to 'trap off'.

But my politics became my social life and brought me into contact with people in the same situation. Comrades in BF seemed to care not only about my part in changing society but for me and my child.

I wouldn't put the clock back. I can't understand why everyone isn't a communist when they'll get nothing out of this world as it is and they have everything to gain under socialism.



Turning Point

Consciousness-raising, and a general sensitivity to the way political understanding develops, is not an abstract bourgeois issue. We believe it is an essential tool in the fight to change our material conditions. We need an enormous amount of support from each other, to give us the strength to keep battling against the ways capitalism and the State distort all areas of our lives. Sandra has been working for three years on a council estate in Leeds as a part-time youth and community worker. She is a single parent of two and has no college education. She first became interested in politics seven years ago when she was part of a successful campaign of local women for a safe road crossing. She is also a member of B.F.

Everyone on the estate where I work faces similar problems — bad housing, 'black damp', poor bus service, no play areas, vandalism, poverty. But certain streets have even more severe problems because the council operates an informal policy of putting 'problem' families together.

I work with the women of four such streets. Many women expect their kids to be taken into care, they have huge rent arrears, often no gas or electricity, 'disturbed' kids. Several are on probation, as often as not for illegally reconnecting their gas/electricity supplies.

One woman, on her own with three kids, has been disconnected for two years. She is on probation for re-connection. One of her kids recently set his hair on fire, trying to do his homework over a candle. She is suicidal at the thought of another winter without heat.

I am employed by the education department as a youth and community worker and I run a women's group. The women identify with me because I've been through all and worse than what they have. I never make judgements and they know it. I suggest ideas and wait for them to be mulled over and those they like reappear.

I've been criticized informally by social services for deskilling social work. Social work is a middle-class profession and they don't believe that their clients (and I was one once) can do their job. Well, of course they can.

When I first started, the women met for a mothers' and toddlers' group. Out of discussions on women's rights

and anything that affected our everyday life, like kids wetting the bed or an argument in the street, we began to be a women's group open to all, regardless of whether we had kids. It started as pure entertainment, socializing, a chat, bingo. What comes out is a lot of other things — a women's health group, weekly discussion, and a lot of personal support and problem sharing.

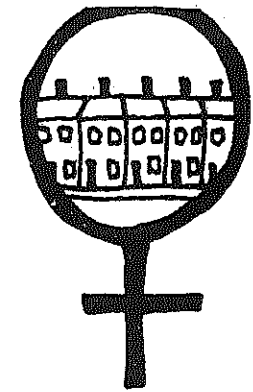
Before people have the strength to fight back, they have to build up confidence that they are not individual failures. Talking together about relationships with husbands, friction with kids, make-up, housework, have helped to reduce those crippling feelings of personal failure. **SUPPORT GIVES PEOPLE STRENGTH. SHARING EXPERIENCES BUILDS UP CONFIDENCE TO FIGHT BACK TOGETHER.**

Women usually lead community struggles. They're around all day facing all the problems. They get away with more. They are often more imaginative and braver. But no matter what they get involved in, they still have to do the same amount of work at home. Working in the community isn't just a question of jumping on the bandwagon when there's a bit of trouble, it's hard slog through the details of people's lives for years and years.

The Council is getting cleverer. They know how to squash potential action. They act faster and buy people off with promises which will never be realized. Inner City money gives the

illusion that money is available. But no-one sees it on our estate, it just seems to subsidize the rates and gets spent on road repairs.

When something happens on the estate now, like when they tried to axe the youth club (and my job), people were prepared to defend that. They petitioned and lobbied the council and walked through town with placards. It wasn't an enormous protest, but it was a start and it wouldn't have happened



without the women's group, and having that chance to explain about the cuts and why those with least get hit most.

I see every little government cutback pushing the women I know one step nearer to despair. But there'll come a time, and I feel it's close now, when we'll all turn round and say we've had enough. Then we'll need every sort of support we can get.



*Women in Islington defend services
for the under fives, October 1979*

Colville Community Nursery

Colville Nursery Centre was the first nursery I had worked in which had a positive view of childcare. It came out of an intensive campaign organized by a local community group. It was opened in 1977 but the staff were employed in September 1976 so that we could get to know each other, thrash out our ideas on how and why the centre was there and what general policies we would have.

The principle of taking in *any* kid from the catchment area was quite a new one for most of us. We had all been used to Day Nursery set-ups which only take kids from 'problem' backgrounds. We therefore talked a lot about changing our role from 'substitute mothers' or 'babysitters' to a more positive one of educators and stimulators, giving emotional and physical support to parents and kids.

We started by visiting some of the kids in the catchment area, and got to know them and their parents quite well before the centre opened. Sexism, racism and class were discussed, and we decided to have a policy of positive discrimination towards employing working-class women and men. This was mainly because childcare is usually seen as a middle-class woman's job. So many of the kids in that area either had no fathers around or their fathers were heavy, aggressive men. We felt that if men were employed, then the kids would learn to relate to men in a different way.

During the 3 months before the centre opened, we carefully chose toys and books and other equipment which would be stimulating and interesting, non-sexist and non-racist, and encourage sharing and co-operation. This was obviously one of the most difficult tasks, but we did end up with a good range. We decided that all decisions made about the running of the centre would be made collectively, involving the kids.

We encouraged the parents to use the centre both at night for meetings and socials, and during the day for sewing classes, learning to read and write, speak English, and just generally chatting or playing with the kids.

The vast majority of parents who came were mums. We could share problems and talk about them in a way I'd never experienced in nursery jobs before. Because, for once, they as mothers were being regarded as real people with real lives, not as 'problems' or 'irresponsible'. We also had parent/staff meetings which dealt with organizational matters, fundraising, social activities or any problems.

It is a tough job to stick to the new practice and principles of positive childcare which involves parents and the community. It requires a lot of stamina and patience. But working at Colville was the most stimulating job I have ever done.

HILARY TRUSCOTT



SALLY AND RICHARD GREENHILL

16 Walking a tightrope



The Paid Shift

THE number of women in the labour force has risen dramatically over the last thirty years. Women now represent 40% of the working population. Membership in trade unions has increased just as rapidly, so that 30% of trade unionists are women.

Women have been drawn back into the labour force, but not on equal terms with men. Women's jobs and wages are generally inferior and they do work that is traditionally considered 'women's work', mainly in the service sector. Participation in the labour force has given us some financial independence but has not alleviated our oppression as women. It is now twofold, as women and as workers.

Employers use the patriarchal system in attempting to ensure the docility and loyalty of the female workforce. For example, at Lucas in Birmingham, the workers are allowed to leave their machine on a Friday afternoon to buy make-up from the 'beauty lady' who sets up a stall in the factory.

Legislation has not provided any solution. The difference in average weekly earnings between men and women has increased nearly £20 a week since the Equal Pay Act in 1974. Progressive legislation may be a step in the right direction, but it can provide a false security and discourage militancy.

Workplace organising becomes even more of an important issue, as increasing numbers of women go out to work. But the male-dominated labour movement continually fails to be responsible to women's needs. As a consequence, many women feel alienated from it altogether. Despite the limitations of the unions, it is important that women join. We must fight for unions which offer women material benefits and protect their interests. But it is no use leaving it to the men. Women must organise independently within the union.

MAKING THE LINKS

Women's issues should become integral to the general demands of the union. For example, it may be more appropriate to fight for 5 shorter days rather than a 4 day week. The union has provided men with some sort of social network. It should do the same for women. But this is only possible if creches are provided for meetings and social activities. It is not only women that should raise this issue, men are parents too.

It is often very demoralising for women to take up shop steward positions. To avoid isolation we can encourage collective work, so the woman remains in close contact with the people she represents and can feel their support.

The double life of women as producers and reproducers means that the limited demands the union make for pay and conditions only relate to part

of their lives. Women's lack of support for the union is generally not because they are right-wing but because their allegiance is to their home, even if they are the sole breadwinner. This leads us to a struggle against female stereotyping and the imposed female role, but more importantly to a struggle against the split between work and home. It is these linkages that we should make in the union, taking up issues that affect women regardless of whether or not they are working e.g. abortion and cuts in the social services. Organising in the community should be seen as part of our workplace activity. The fight against closures in the steel communities shows how the links can be made.

WOMEN'S WORK

In this section several women relate their experiences in organising in different sorts of workplaces, showing how women and men workers are not affected by their work in the same way. Women do not have the same confidence to articulate their needs. Their work in the home makes a fundamental difference to their activity in the union. Women at work need the support of a strong women's movement.

ANDREW WIARD (REPORT)



Through songs, words, theatre, poetry, film, graphics, and jokes, women have been building a new world for us to live in. All the images we have of ourselves from the past are ones which at best confine and confuse us, at worst degrade and degrade us.

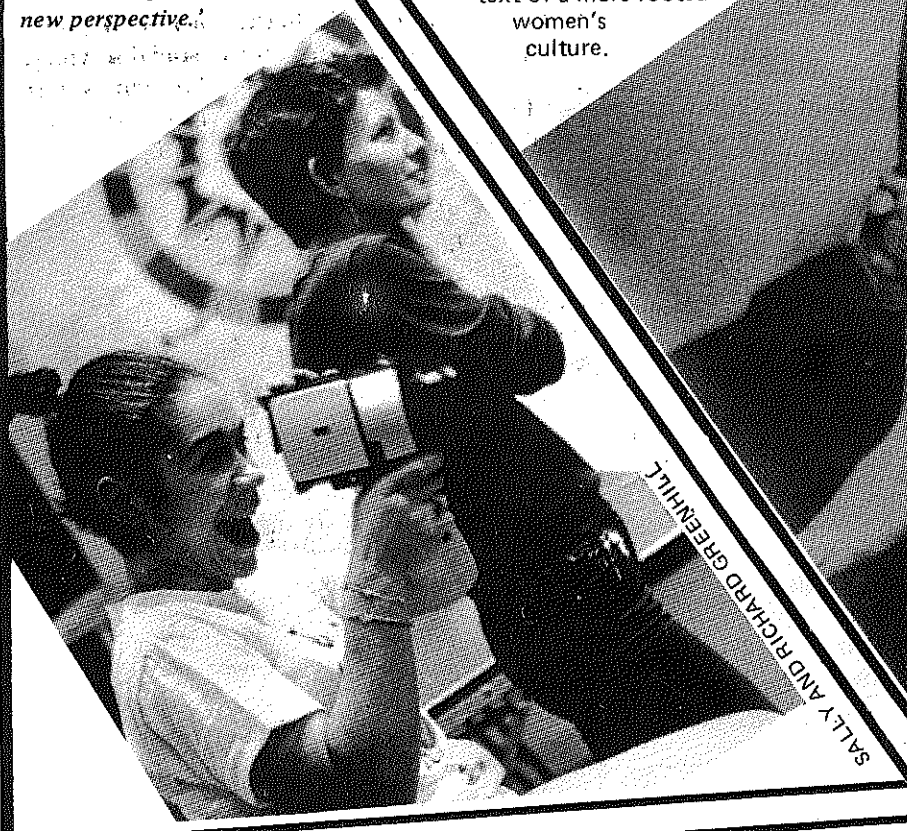
Nowhere is this clearer than in relation to our sexuality. We are born female, but we become 'women' — women waiting for a man. Without a man we were invisible, incomplete. To challenge male-dominated culture on our own, we risked losing society's approval and being forced to live alone.

To begin to create our own culture we have had to change that dependency and relook at everything that had been said before about women and love, romance, and sexuality.

Today we are creating new and stronger images of ourselves, with a new idea of sensuality and new ways of valuing ourselves.

Seeing ourselves differently changes how we relate to each other, together as women, or with men. Our efforts still generate the heady excitement and pleasure of early women's events and new-found sisterhood, as well as painful confrontations and change. But these changes now take place within the context of a more rooted women's culture.

'The most far-reaching revolutions have been inspired by nothing more (or less) than seeing the obvious from a new perspective.'



SALLY AND RICHARD GREENHILL



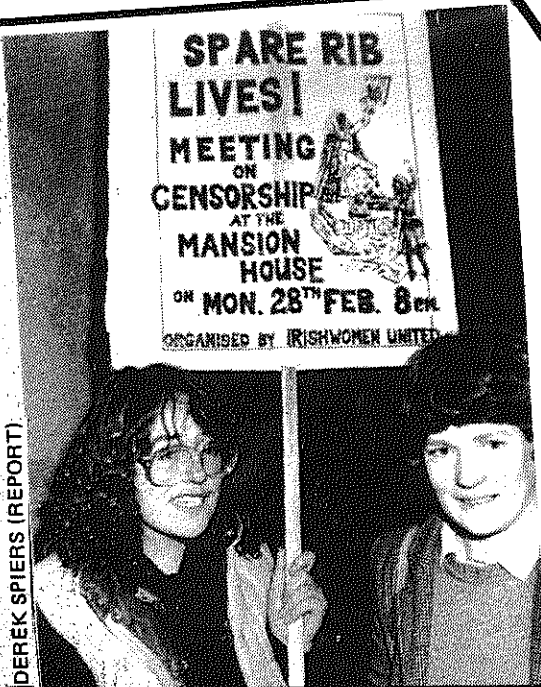
From 'OUR BODIES OURSELVES'

Changin



it feels like
my first big date
yet here I am
a twentysix year old
veteran of the sex war
arranging
to meet a woman
for dinner

Margot Nash



DEREK SPIERS (REPORT)

SPARE RIB LIVES!
MEETING ON CENSORSHIP
AT THE MANSION HOUSE
ON MON. 28TH FEB. 8pm
ORGANISED BY IRISHWOMEN UNITED

left:
Marie McMahon and Rita O'Hare, March 1980, demonstrating in Dublin against the banning of women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib* because of its coverage of women's sexuality.

MARGOT NASH

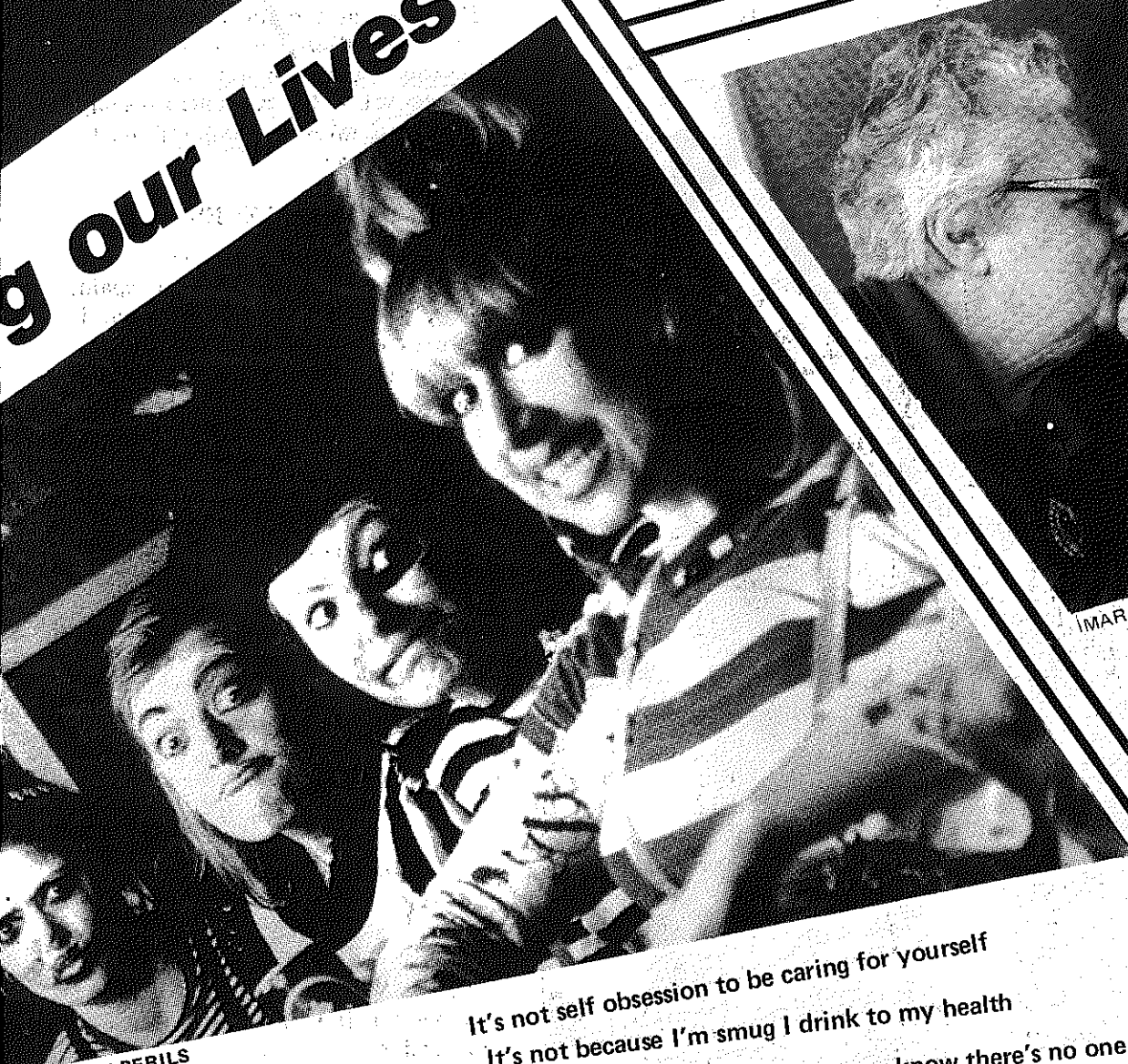
...And now I try and sing your song
 And hope to understand
 Who I am, and who you were,
 Women of my land.
 —from Frankie Armstrong's song
 'Women of my land'



SALLY AND HARRIET GREEN

WOMEN'S SINGING WORKSHOP WITH FRANKIE ARMSTRONG

g our Lives

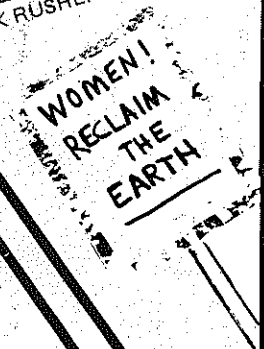


YL AND THE PERILS

It's not self obsession to be caring for yourself
 It's not because I'm smug I drink to my health
 When the phone stops ringing you know there's no one else.
 (Lyrics by Jam Today)



MARK RUSHER (IFL)



The ageing of a militant

WHEN I was young, I thought nursing was a boring job that women did who couldn't think of anything else to do. I didn't want to be like my cousins, doing something that seemed to be so typically women's work. I never dreamt that one day, I too would be a nurse.

I started my training to be a nurse in '75. This was just after Labour's announcement of cuts in public spending, and cuts committees were formed all over the country. Hospitals had become

unionised in a big way and we were all learning from the labour movement. In one sense it was a bad time, as cuts were happening all over the country, but in another way it was very exciting, as you felt people were really beginning to take their health care seriously. I went on a shop stewards course, took part in women and health conferences, and went on demonstrations against the cuts. We had a two-week strike at my hospital over victimisation and built up a lot of

solidarity as we produced a daily strike bulletin and mounted a picket at the main gate.

There were a lot of women on the picket line, domestics and nurses, but after the action, most of them didn't take an active part in the union. We had very lively union meetings, mostly because they were held in the social club, but many women couldn't get out in the evening. I became the chairwoman of the union district committee, which was all right at first when there was still a lot of militant action. As chairwoman, I could overstep the rules of meetings a bit and encourage women to speak who wouldn't usually say much. However, as the action died down and the militants stopped coming, I couldn't get away with pretending not to know the rules and became more and more outmanoeuvred by die-hard bureaucrats.

LONG TERM CHANGES

This is what happens with women organising time and again. They're at the forefront when it comes to taking action, then lose their place in consolidating those gains as housework and the family reclaim a woman's time. This is why the women's movement is so important to keep up a collective pressure and to support women trying to make long-term changes.

Although women in the health service are joining unions very rapidly, they are still not well represented in the union hierarchies. Hospitals are cutting back on nursery provision, and the NHS is not flexible in offering part-time jobs for women who want to stay in nursing but can't work full-time. Without these two provisions, legislation for maternity leaves becomes a hollow promise which doesn't relate to women's real situation just after they've had a baby.

Over the years that I've been working in the NHS, Big Flame has maintained a consistent emphasis on the importance of struggles in the public sector. In the last couple



of years, as the Labour government was implementing more and more anti-working class policies, this emphasis has been very supportive and important. The fightback has been unevenly spread over the country, and it is essential to be able to refer to occupations, work-
ins and industrial actions taking place in other hospitals even when organisation is at a low key in your own place of work. It has also helped to think about new forms of industrial action since tactics that applied in industry like all-out strikes don't work so well in the public sector where often the people most affected are other sections of the working class.

There is also another strand — the growing understanding of the

State as a form of control. Although the NHS is seen as a gain overall for the working class, there has been more and more criticism of the way patients are treated. Expectations have risen, and people don't just want free medical care, they want good sympathetic treatment. Much of this criticism has come from the women and health movement, and from people working in health and safety and preventive medicine. This makes you think about how you act as a 'professional'.

For me, this meant a real crisis of confidence as I tried to do a good job, run a happy democratic ward, fight against the cuts and be politically active at work. This hasn't been very successful and usually

people just thought I was an inefficient nurse.

We have a long way to go before we have a strong radical health movement within the institutions as well as good organisation at the place of work, both of which are important for a socialist perspective on health. We should help support the work of groups such as Health Fightback, which works mainly in the trade union movement, and the Politics of Health group which has a wider and more long-term perspective. It's going to be even harder to get such a total movement in the face of the Tory backlash which is trying to dismantle the Welfare State.

SARAH MARTIN

Blinding us with science

When I became a science teacher, I was confronted by a whole set of issues and problems which are not easily resolved.

I taught in an all-girls school, and to them physics and chemistry were masculine subjects because they were divorced of feeling, cold hard abstract subjects with formal language, divorced from everyday life. To resolve this problem, I taught more and more biology as a way of reaching them and raising issues which we felt were important such as contraceptive advice, abortion, sex roles, etc. The girls felt they had something to offer and participated in the discussions

In chemistry, however, it was

difficult for the feminism to come through. The only thing I could do was to try to demystify the subject by illustrating the subject with current examples such as Seveso, nuclear power, pesticides, defoliants, food additives, drugs and their side effects and so on.

The rude awakening came when I transferred to a single-sex boys' school. The boys demanded more from me: printed notes, studious preparation of lessons, etc. No longer was I the font of all human knowledge, they had scientific knowledge of their own to teach me — after all, I was only a woman. They had been conditioned even by the age of eleven to feel they had

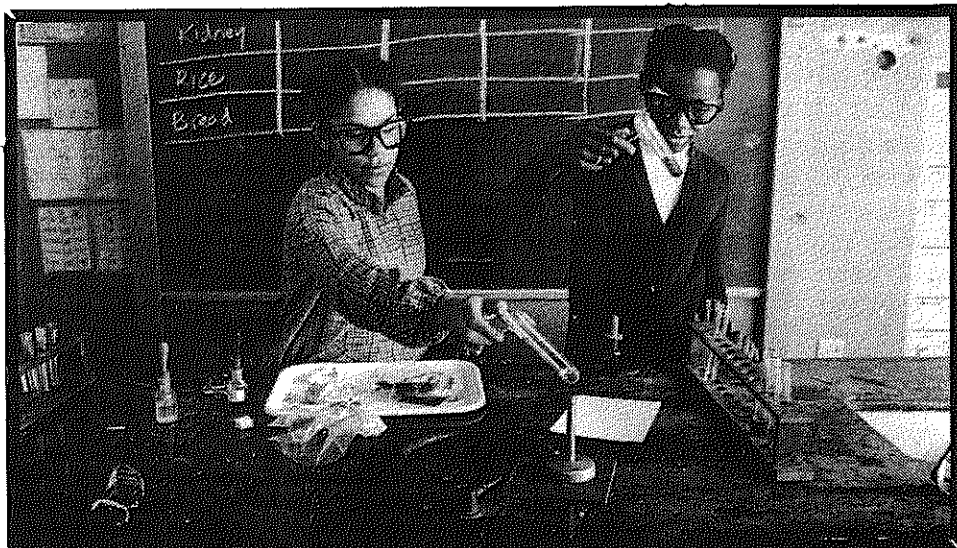
something to offer, especially where the sciences were involved.

The girls had seldom asked questions and if they did, it was only for further illumination of a point. In their minds the scientific world was 'out there' not related to their own lives — a sad fact since they were confronted by complex technology and applied science every day outside school. Since they demanded less and had been conditioned to be passive, the reality of the situation was that they in turn received less — even from someone consciously trying to overcome this situation. Changes in content and structure of lessons alone is not enough.

The recent cuts in educational expenditure can only make the situation worse for women. Apart from their detrimental effects for all pupils through larger classes, shortages of books, etc. it is the girls who will suffer, especially in single-sex schools. Curricula choice will be limited to the point that no examination courses will be run for small groups. In all girls schools those small groups are in the science subjects. Specialist science teachers will leave schools where examination teaching is not available and a deterioration in science teaching and materials will spread further down the school.

What are they trying to do, blind us with science?

DIANE BAKER



SALLY AND RICHARD GREENHILL

Working at Lucas

I WENT to Lucas for a job more out of economic necessity than by political choice. The factory in South Birmingham is the smallest in the Aerospace division of Lucas Industries. The majority of the production workers are women.

The male-female division can be seen more as supervisors versus workers where line management use subtle physical harassment to maintain fear and discipline.

The general conditions in the factory are fairly brutal with the threat of losing your job always over your head. The clock cards are all-important. In the training school — one week of Lucas philosophy brainwash — we were told that it is better to take the day off than be late. The work stations are arranged facing the air ventilation with your backs to the supervisors' desks. They correct figures on your productivity hour after hour even though we have no piece work.

VERTICAL

In contrast, foremen are united in their position and maintain a free network of communication. The links with the workers are very formal and are made vertically. It is procedure to bring any query first to the foreman, so you see more of them than your workmates.

The union organisation is a permanent problem. As a steward I have a never ending battle against company and media ideology. The fact that my personal history and lifestyle was strange to most people I work with, as were my ideas (I am nicknamed 'Trots'), meant I had to be very careful to establish my personal credibility with people before raising wider, more political issues. This meant not only being above reproach in my time-keeping and share and quality of work, but also having long chats about family, husbands, and decorating. I needed to have a good ear and deal with personal grievances successfully.

It is only recently that I have been very open about my politics. This is mainly due to the increasing conflicts with management. They are tightening up even more, threatening us with redundancies if we

don't do as we are told. In this situation, I have to be upfront. In addition, I am fairly well established. My workmates are no longer concerned that I don't have a handbag and I'm not married. They know I will take up even a weak case, that we have a good laugh together, and that my heart is in the right place.

There is a problem being a shop steward without strong union organisation. But we did organise a walk-out last summer over a basic question of fairness between shifts, which nobody had the chance to stop. We won and were paid for the lost time as well. The biggest lesson that I have learned is that to organise effectively is a long job

and that it is vital that you know when is the best time to take action if you are going to succeed.

I only intended stopping in the job for six months. However the admiration and love I developed for the people working in the factory has led me to make a fairly long-term commitment. It wears you out sometimes, you feel isolated and often find little support. You find your time is all taken, home suffers, and thinking becomes very day to day. I am lucky. I am more elastic than most of my workmates. I don't need to be stuck here for the rest of my life. That is the frustration but also the basis for persisting. Most of them haven't that choice.

WENDY GREEN



HACKNEY FLASHERS

Part timers — fighting the divide

I SUPPOSE I'm fairly typical of a part-time worker. Firstly, I'm a woman trying to fit in as much paid work as I can around the already full-time job of running a house and looking after two small children. Part-time work for women like me isn't to pay for the luxuries or for 'a bit of social life', it's hard economic necessity to supplement the low wage of the man I live with. I couldn't get a full-time job if I wanted — there's not exactly a surfeit of teaching jobs and there aren't the nursery places anyway.

Part-time work is very convenient for a lot of women, and employers really exploit this. I work for the education department where there is a definite trend towards creating a few, new, well-paid posts in administration and leaving the grass roots of teaching or face-to-face community work to the part-timers. 'Management' is rapidly creating a situation where all the actual teaching is being done by part-timers. The well-paid admin jobs are given to carefully selected

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people (usually men) who will implement policy unquestioningly and with no cost to themselves, as they won't ever have to feel the pinch of working in impossible situations.

Many part-timers work in appalling conditions — their offices are on the corner of a filing cabinet with access to a phone at lunch time. Under these conditions they organize vital meal services and clubs for scores of old people and organize play groups.

It is education department policy that part-time contracts virtually never go up to 16 hours so we've no job security, entitlement to sickness benefit or holiday pay. We're often paid for only a fraction of the time we actually do, not counting the endless fundraising, organizing summer fetes, jumble sales, cultural festivals.

We've got no political muscle at present, we're unorganized, easily exploited, easily expendable. In our union, NATFHE, there's a policy that full-timers should refuse to do overtime if that teaching could be done by a part-timer. But in many situations that policy is ignored. At a local level the unions don't bother to encourage the part-timers to join. They accept that we act as a buffer against the recession. Part-timers work on very individual time tables and rarely come together.

DOUBLE EDGED

As the economic recession gets worse, part-time work is going to be used as a double-edged tool. In areas such as mine, there is a trend towards part-time work. In unskilled areas of industry, part-time work is going to be the first to go, e.g. the mums' shift in the textile industry. Women and men, black and white are going to find themselves working in unorganized sweat shop conditions or face unemployment.

We must work to overcome the divisions between full- and part-timers that management in both public and private sectors is so slick at exploiting. We should unite wherever possible around the key demand for a shorter working week for all with no loss of pay.

SHEILA PENN

Catering for themselves

Service industries employ 75% of all women workers. They do jobs that are associated with women's traditional role in the home such as servicing other people and cleaning. The hotel industry is one such industry. Women make up two thirds of hotel workers. They are employed as chambermaids, waitresses, kitchen assistants, laundry workers, and receptionists. Except for receptionists, these jobs are at the bottom of the hotel hierarchy, and some of the most physically demanding jobs the hotel has to offer. Hall porters, room service and skilled silver service waiters in the posh restaurants are all men. In the kitchen, women are usually kitchen assistants or staff canteen chaps, leaving the main cooking to the men. There is no written rule

about women not being luggage porters but if a woman applied for a 'man's job', she would be told there were no vacancies.

Women earn on average about two-thirds of what men earn. The employers' side on the wages council uses the argument that most women workers are not heads of households, in order to keep wages down. It is almost impossible to fight for equal pay because of the clear division of women and men in different jobs.

The hotel industry depends on a large number of part-time workers of which three-quarters are women. Of 300,000 women working in hotels, 133,000 work part-time. This means that they do not qualify for the same benefits and legal protection as full-time workers,



Laundry workers in Acton

which obviously suits the employers.

Women migrant workers are in the worst situation. Most of the low-status jobs are filled not just by women, but by immigrant women. Most English women get jobs as receptionists, though the situation is beginning to change with the increase in unemployment.

In the past eight years, it has been Philippino women who have done the most difficult and low-status jobs in the hotels. Hotel companies have used agencies in the Philippines to recruit mainly women to work as resident domestics. They pay a large fee for a package that includes a job, work permit, and airfare. The renewal of the work permit is at the discretion of the employer and they cannot change jobs without the permission of the Home Office. The women usually live in, and work two or three jobs in order to support their families at home. This leaves little

room for a social life and many become lonely and depressed.

Today many of those women face deportation. A requirement for being issued a resident domestic work permit was that the women had to be single and childless. Even if the women were not informed of this regulation by the employment agencies, they are now considered to be illegal immigrants. These women have worked extremely hard for many years, have bought houses, and consider Britain their home. They have nothing to go back to, but unemployment and poverty.

WHOSE SIDE ARE THEY ON?

The nature of the hotel industry makes it very difficult to organise. Because women are the majority of hotel workers, they are the key to building the union. But the two unions that organise hotel workers, the GMWU and the TGWU, do little to relate to the specific needs of

women. The union is male-dominated. Most of the shop stewards are men, and are often heads of department. They look down on the chambermaids, and one sometimes wonders if they know which side they're on. Most branch positions are taken by men.

Despite the alienation most women feel towards the union, they have still been joining. At the Grosvenor House Hotel, 15 chambermaids put up a good fight against the mighty Trust Houses Forte. Chambermaids at Claridge's showed more determination on the picket-line than the male chefs who led the walk-out.

Chambermaids have been such solid union members partly because of the particularly difficult jobs they do, but also because they form a cohesive group within the hotel. Because of the segregation and hierarchical structure in the hotel, chambermaids associate mainly with each other. They sit at the



ANDREW WIARD (REPORT)

Picket outside the Grosvenor House Hotel in Park Lane when workers were dumped on the streets with their packed bags.

same tables for tea and lunch breaks. Many live in, so they go out together in the evening. A feeling of solidarity and community develops based on friendship and their common work. So when grievances begin to multiply and there is talk of joining the union, the chambermaids will often join en masse. Most women hotel workers do

not see themselves as feminists and have never been part of the women's movement. But the groups that arise from working together every day serve the same function of giving support and a chance to discuss personal problems and politics, as the women's groups that feminists know. Feminism may not be there in name, but it is there

nevertheless. It is crucial in giving women the strength and confidence to battle at work and to transform the union so it serves their needs.

LAURA CAMPBELL

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HACKNEY FLASHERS