

AA REPLY TO CD'S DOCUMENT ON WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

INTRODUCTION : I disagree with a large amount of CD's document and certainly disagree with the idea that Big Flame women should start organising around the demand for Wages for Housework. While what I am writing is a critique of Wages for Housework and of CD's document I don't want to see a situation where we dismiss discussion about how to organise with housewives, women on estates, battered wives and choose instead to work with women in waged work. Also we cannot ignore the fact that women's dependence on men for money is a main factor in our dependence on men sexually and psychologically., and is a major factor in the crippling of our self-identity and power. But what I want to argue is that economic independence which is won by getting a wage for housework isn't the issue we should organise around with women.

The ways in which women gain confidence and power are by organising together with other women (and men) for their needs against capitalist oppression and exploitation. This is often expressed as organising for more money and less work, but there are also many struggles against sexism and the ideological oppression of women. Women's struggle cannot be reduced to and contained in the demand 'Wages for Housework' - and it is dangerous to think it could be.

CD's document doesn't convince me that Wages for Housework is a unifying demand, or a lever to initiate women's struggle, or a rallying point for an autonomous women's movement. I don't pretend that what follows will provide answers as to what we can do - mainly because I don't think that any one demand can sum up the content of women's struggles without also distorting them.

I think the analysis of The Power of Women Collective (POW) and the over-concentration on wage demands leads to a crude economic determinism, as well as misunderstanding the wage relationship. I hope to develop this point later but one of the problems in writing this reply has been a lack of time to fully develop and explain certain points which unfortunately might mean that some of what follows is brief, and for those who haven't had the chance to read various critiques of POW, a bit confusing. There are many useful things which have been written mainly in the magazine 'RED RAG', as well as the article 'Chips with Everything' in the first BF Internal Bulletin. There aren't many copies of this around but it's definitely worth reading.

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It's true that POW more than any other group have talked about the position of housewives and pointed out the importance of women's work in the house as work. It's true that housework is work, but it's not work which produces surplus value in the way that waged work in the factory does. It is work which produces social value and in its organisation remains outside the capitalist mode of production. One of the theoretical justifications for Wages for Housework is that domestic labour (housework) is productive. If it is productive labour then it should be paid for by a wage, and the wage is power. By getting money for housework POW believe that it will free women from housework. I disagree. As we wrote in a women's document for the first national conference (BF):

" raising or demanding the issue of wages for housework, while focussing on housework being work and not a natural way of expressing love or friendship to those you live with, does not explicitly say that housework is not necessarily women's work and therefore does not challenge the sexual division of labour"

POW define all women as housewives first and foremost and reduce all family and sexual relations to part of housework. Thus they can write:

" They say it is love, we call it unpaid work. They call it frigidity ... we call it absenteeism"  
(Wages against Housework)

statements like this make me shudder - but more of this later.

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Their statement that:

" All women are housewives. Single or married,  
young or old, with or without children, lesbian  
or straight, that housework is our first job."  
( 'All Work and No Pay' )

This focusses on the fact that women do housework ( but ignores men doing housework ) but it doesn't follow that housework is the primary and exclusive focus that feminists should concentrate on when organising with women. Similarly their analysis and one which CD takes up that women's work outside is paid housework is confusingly simplistic and doesn't offer useful guidelines of how to organise in waged workplace situations. As an example:

What would it have contributed to our work with the Wingrove and Rogers strike to have concentrated exclusively on the fact that all the women were housewives and raised the demand of winning wages for housework, instead of helping them with the specific struggle they were fighting ? I don't believe that they were low paid there before the strike because they are unpaid for work in the home, nor can we see their work as an extension of housework. CD says page 4.

" Like the work of domestics in hospitals, cooks in canteens, or the women who work in the bagwash, it's low paid because it's not paid in the house"

Does this mean that the way to win wage rises and overcome wage differentials is not to organise at work but to organise at home? And what proof is there that if women did get money outside of work that they would be able to win rises at work ?

The reason why women's wages are generally lower than men's, why women are exploited as workers and oppressed as women are fantastically complex and can't just be reduced to a question of who does the housework. Nor can sexism be overcome merely by altering wage differentials because ideology although it is related to economic factors is not totally dependent on them.

(This is the beginning of a longer document. I hoped to get the whole thing finished a lot sooner - I am still trying to get the rest out before the meeting on Wednesday. But thought it was better if at least people could see a small part of it now.....)

CM -BF Central Branch.

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### Sexual division of labour

the sexual division of labour is not a creation of capitalism but predates it, and has been used by capital in its own interests. But now, for the first time since industrialisation, women are in a position to overcome the material basis for this division, that is being totally tied to having kids. Whatever our objections to the inadequacies of contraception and the fight that is necessary still before we can get free safe abortions if we want them, we can't ignore the immense changes it's made for women, the spaces that have been opened up for us. It gives us a relative freedom of choice about how we live our lives, when we have kids if we do want them, and we can find an identity for ourselves outside of the role of housewife and mother. It means that we can go out to work if we want to ... and many women, myself included do want to and not just stay in the house. It's true that working outside the home is not absolute freedom while the bosses still control its organisation, but its freedom from the isolation of the house and a way of meeting other people, organising with them.

While CDs document is good in that it focusses on women outside of waged work and ways of organising with them, which we don't talk enough about, I think she ignores some of the positive effects that working outside the home has for women. Firstly that it gives women a chance to be in daily contact with other workers which provides a potential power base against capitalism, which is a fundamental Marxist truth.

'The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoters are the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers due to competition, by their revolutionary combination due to association. The development of modern industry therefore cuts from under its feet the very foundation off which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces above all is its own

gravediggers.'  
Marx Communist Manifesto \*\*

Secondly it gives women the possibility of finding an identity other than that of wife, mother.

I'm not saying that the way to build a revolutionary women's movement is to force everyone out to work: there is no simple formula to do this. But we mustn't ignore women fighting against discrimination at work, against unions refusing to defend women's jobs, as part of an assertion of women's power that contributes to the development of a feminist anti-capitalist offensive. Women's struggles at home and at work are often fragmented. What this means for us is not to try to slide the two together under one demand but to take each situation each struggle in its complexity and try to make links between it and other struggles.

### Waged work is not just paid housework

POW assert that women's work outside the home is predominantly waged housework. While there are connections/parallels it's dangerous for revolutionary strategy to be as rigid as they tend to be in this assertion and not to look at the way capitalism has been forced to develop by the struggles of the working class, or the ways it develops to try and smash the working class, recuperate what it's lost.

The theoretical basis for POW's analysis comes from a misreading of Capital

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\*\* The reason why I'm using quotes is because I hope that they're useful to other people in understanding what I'm talking about. It's not to intimidate you into agreeing with my argument because I've quoted Marx or whoever. I've found reading these things useful, and while I'd obviously like others to reach my conclusions it's more important that we all have adequate ways to reach an understanding of the issues, to be able to discuss with one another.

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and an application of an analysis Marx makes about 'manufacture' (which is industrial organisation from, roughly the 16th - late 18th century) to modern capitalism. The quote talks about how a hierarchy of labour develops which is very rigid and which defines each worker for the whole of her /his life and in every aspect of life.

'manufacture develops a hierarchy of labour powers, to which there corresponds a scale of wages. If on the one hand the individual labourers are appropriated and annexed for life by a limited function; on the other hand, the various operations of the hierarchy are parcelled out and among the labourers according to their natural and acquired capabilities' Marx Capital Volume I p.330 Lawrence and Wishart edition

fair enough. But Marx explicitly states that modern capitalism gradually destroys and erodes this division of labour, this hierarchy based on skill as technological development supercedes worker's craft skills. This deskilling and reduction of the labour process to fragmented 'scientific' organisation of work is a general tendency in capitalism and applies equally to men and women's work. It lays the base for men and women's work to become more and more similar, more and more boring. It doesn't automatically follow that sexism disappears overnight as there are fewer differences between men and women's work because ideological changes lag behind or continue to exist. How this will change, how the sexual hierarchy at home and work will be broken down is something which I can't answer except in a negative sense. It won't happen if we analyse women's work under capitalism as static, as an extension of housework because we will miss noticing new developments, new contradictions which give us as women space to organise around.

To continue this point with some examples as to how 'women's' work has changed, and with it women's expectations for themselves.

Weaving used to be a skilled man's job until the 19th century. With capitalist reorganisation it was moved out of the household unit of production into factories and at the same time it was women who were primarily employed (and children) to do the work NOT skilled, well organised men. It was cheaper for capital to use unskilled, traditionally unorganised female and child labour and also to use the sexual division of labour to its advantage in another way. Male trade unionists saw this process as women 'taking' men's jobs and wouldn't let them join their skilled unions, letting them stay unorganised and weak, instead of fighting together against capitalism. Other jobs used to be 'women's' jobs are now men's jobs.. like heavy agricultural work, carrying coal out of the pits and loading it onto trucks and bricklaying.

And we know from the first and second world wars that capital will try to shape our consciousness about work in different ways to suit its ends. It will do all it can to get women to work in 'traditional' male jobs if there is a shortage of labour, provide nurseries and creches to take care of our children so we can work for them .... and then try to force us back into the home again after whether we want to go or not. None of the ways capitalism does this is by cooking up powerful theories to justify what it's up to like the 'national interest' or 'maternal deprivation'. The latter, along with family allowances were attempts to persuade women that their duty, their obligation was to stay at home bringing up the kids. Why? Because there weren't enough jobs after the war for men and women and the State didn't want to continue to provide nurseries and creches for kids where they could be with other kids in nice situations with books and toys etc. No it was cheaper to pay Mum, to offer Mum a financial reward for staying at home with the kids. (I don't see family allowances as a 'wage' for housework and child care... and it's here that the inadequacy of my marxism strands me, making an assertion that I'm not capable of proving to anyone else)

What our task as feminists and socialists is, is to find ways of destroying capitalism's ability to define us women in ways that suit its interests, not ours. We are not just housewives, we are not just sex objects, we are not just workers. We are women and we want to be people with real choices, real freedom to develop. And we have been able to do this, we have been able to build our power. However inadequate they are the Equal Pay Act and Equal Opportunities Act are expressions of the changes we've forced on capital since the war, since the bosses have wanted us to see ourselves as housewives and mothers. Sex roles are changing. A lot of women's expectations of themselves and their relationships with men have fundamentally altered. Men's attitudes have also changed with more men doing housework, sharing in childcare. Women do 'men's jobs', men do 'women's' jobs. What this means to me is that women's work and women's jobs aren't static, can't be reduced to 'housework' and that we shouldn't just organise around wages for housework, around a demand that accepts a definition of women which women are rejecting.

Another aspect of POW's analysis that everything women do is housework in the interests of capital leads them into a crude estimation of the power of capitalism over every aspect of our lives. For instance they say that women make love with men to service capital, that women bring up kids to service capital. Sure, it's part of what goes on and it's important to see housework as work. But if we were to be paid wages for this work how would this undermine what they see as capital's total control over women? I'd like to take up a point that CD raises in her document.

'Housework is work that is defined and organised by the bosses in their own interests.'

Surely the answer then as in any other situation to organise against the capitalist organisation of work not against the work itself. If we accept that bringing up kids, making love with men or women is work, then are we saying that we want to destroy this work or that we want to control it, organise it in our interests? I agree that a lot of housework cooking, cleaning, washing etc etc can be soul destroying drudgery when done in isolation when all the responsibility for it in a house is shouldered by one person, as often as not a woman. But there are ways it can be organised on our terms, collectively, not necessarily based in individual households. Like free community controlled nurseries community laundries etc. etc. What passes for socialised housework as CD says is still 'soul destroying' but that's because it's still organised on capitalist lines, there's a boss breathing down your neck or a supervisor trying to catch you drinking tea on the job. It's de-skilled, fragmented, repetitive. But the way it is now under capitalism isn't an argument against the idea that housework can't be socialised in a way that we want.

It comes down to a question of what you want and how it's best to campaign around getting it. The demand wages for housework doesn't say to me that what is being demanded is socialised housework on our terms, and as I've already said I think it reinforces the idea that housework is women's work which needs to be 'recognised' by capitalism as work through the payment of a wage, but without saying it shouldn't be organised as it is now under capitalism. I know that an argument against this is to say it's how we fight for the wages that matters and that will be what's most important. But this means that the demand isn't very clear in what it means and if it isn't clear how can it then be a rallying point for women to organise around. Demands like 35 hours without loss of pay, or free abortion on demand a woman's right to choose are to me much clearer and hence better demands to take up and in saying this I know I'm not offering a demand which covers the area of housework. I'd say that what's needed is a demand which is more precise than socialised housework, but along those lines, and another demand which raises the issue of women's economic dependence on men. As these questions which I want to see discussed more fully, and while what I'm writing may come

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want to see discussed more fully, and while what I'm writing may come across as a demolition job (or an attempt at that) on CDs document its not because I disagree with us writing about NHD discussing the best ways of working with women, in and out of waged work, but because I disagree with her conclusions. Its absolutely essential, too, that we discuss how we can help build a more powerful autonomous womens movement that involves far more women in revolutionary struggle.

There are more things which I was going to write against POW but its late and I want to finish SO the question I want us to answer is what are the advantages and the implications of organising around the demand Wages for housework in concrete situations of our practice with women in communities and in waged work? as part of an answer i dont think that if we took up this demand that it would make more women go on rent strikes for example because to encourage people to go on rent strike and for women to get together in struggle we need to be saying a lot more than Fight for wages for housework. Things like housing is a right not a privilege, why should we pay more to live in slums, better facilities for the kids are more likely to have a direct impact. (as a parallel to Wages for housework saying everything and yet saying nothing it could be argued that we should have a unifying demand for all mens struggles at work like 'abolish surplus value' and while it would sum up the content of struggles against the capitalist organisation of work it wouldnt get more people involved)

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A few general points that have come up while I've been writing this  
1) while alot of us are concerned about how to build an autonomous womens movement we have been slow in the past to put a lot of energy into things which could provide a focus for that and specifically I'm thinking of NAC. The situation has improved lately but we still could do more, take more initiatives and particularly have more discussions in the womens group about ways of getting more women involved in the campaign.

2) all BF women should be involved in political practice with women and be thinking and discussing ways of involving more women in struggle... we often take on a lot of other tasks as well, like writing pamphlets, zapping around to national meetings. This is fine if we can manage it but we should prioritise our activities whenever possible.

3) I think we should discuss specifically the use to us of Womens Struggle Notes on Merseyside as a way of involving, contacting and informing women. Are there ways it could be more widely circulated as it is or does it need radical changes before we can sell it outside womens factories, the hosies etc. Since were producing the next one if there are changes people would like made then its a good opportunity to do something about it.

4) Id also like to see a discussion of ways we can work with women around the cuts in liverpool and fight against the way in which cuts mean more work for women. Not just tail ending struggles but trying to initiate them.

Ive just realised reading this through that theres no discussion about what we have already said in the paper etc which is demanding an independent/guaranteed income for women and why/how this is different to W for H. We'll have to talk about it! (A cop out sos Im going to bed)

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