

Production.

Introduction

I started writing this piece before the BF women's conference in the hope that it would contribute something concrete to the discussion. In the end, I didn't get it finished in time, but I was happy to find that, at the conference, we all seemed to have been moving in the same direction and were able to take a step forward. This is especially true of the decision to build a tighter women's commission that can carry through arguments and discussion and propose strategies, and also of the different workshops, where we came to some agreements about our experience in the past and our move to the future. The only report back from a workshop that I felt dissatisfied with was the housework and community one, for the same reasons as had made me want to write this article in the first place. The report from this workshop was the least productive in terms of new directions, and the vaguest in terms of past experience by which we can judge the usefulness of our perspective. I don't agree with one argument that was put forward that our demands around housework that were agreed to at the BF conference are mainly a framework which we lay over all our other practical work to see if it fits. If they are to stand as demands, some concrete work has to be done around them in their own right. It may turn out that the task is too difficult, that it is impossible to organize houseworkers because they are too scattered and too vulnerable in their isolation to capitalist ideas of their role. Struggle in the community has died down in the last months. It would seem that houseworkers, like workers in the public sector or small factories, are stymied by the social contract. ^{5/8}We all hate it, and grown under its effects, but we haven't yet developed effective ways of combatting it.

What I have tried to put forward in the following article is what I see as the need to develop a practice around people working in the home in the role of servicing and reproducing the labour force. It may not be possible to develop this practice because there aren't enough areas of collectivity. At the same time as organizing houseworkers now as part of a revolutionary project, I also refer to a couple of books I read which were very useful to understand how the role of a houseworker developed in capitalism (Ann Oakley - Housewife) and how a society undergoing a socialist revolution coped with the problem of housework (Delia Davin - Woman-Work). Lastly, I want to emphasize that we have to untangle the muddle over ways and means of working in the home and how to fight against capitalist structures and the fight for the idea of women's liberation. Perhaps one way of looking at this is to say that while the fight against the material conditions of housework take place against the capitalist class, the struggles for socialist feminism take place amongst ourselves and our comrades. There is our relationship to the future generation (child-rearing), to each other (feminist solidarity) and to our collective self (Socialist feminist movement). The struggle for ideas within the revolutionary socialist movement gives us strength in the primary struggle against capitalist repression.

Why are we in BF?

The women in BF are in a state of confusion and that confusion is breeding a sense of powerlessness and loss of identity. Well, I wrote that before the weekend conference so SI'd probably rephrase that now, BUT here's my contribution to discussion.

We should go back a bit to see where our analysis of women's oppression and exploitation started from, why we are in BF and our relationship to the women's movement.

Throughout the development and formation of BF, there has always been a predominant emphasis on the role of domestic labour in women's oppression and exploitation. In fact, this analysis and attempt to understand it in practice is unique to BF in current revolutionary organisations. Marx saw the role of domestic labour when he said that a worker's wage is historically determined not by the value of what he produces, but by the level of existence which the

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is unique to BF in current revolutionary organisations. Marx saw the role of domestic labour when he said that a worker's wage is historically determined not by the value of what he produces, but by the level of existence which the class as a whole has struggled for. Included in this is the work that women put into maintaining the family, which can come more or less cheap.

Since the flash of this original insight on our part, we haven't broadened our view much, and from the end of the conference and the beginning of the project, we have come floundering to a stop. We have continued to theorise about the role of housework, without much link in practice and the theory has meant different things to different people. Amongst these are:

- 1) To many outside groups, we have been identified with the Power of Women collective and the Wages for Housework campaign
- 2) Within BF, some of us have taken the emphasis on housework at an ideological level i.e. that whether we do housework or not, we are still identified with it. In every man's eye, there is a picture of us captive behind the kitchen sink or out of the way with a creaming infant. This is parallel to the women's movement saying that no woman on her own can be free in a man's world; we have to find liberation as a collective movement.
- 3) Others in BF have jumped from the rule that housework is woman's work, to saying that all women's work is housework. This belief is used to demystify the areas of work that are seen as exclusive to woman, all the so-called caring nurturing and servicing jobs which are low-paid and low-valued in this society. This is meant to promote a hard-nosed attitude to your job so that women will say 'Stuff the feeling; give men the money'. This rests on two assumptions. The first is that women automatically see housework as of low status and therefore if you use the term to describe a job, women will stop caring about their job. Secondly, it ignores the fact that women may well fight for higher wages and better organization in a job because they want higher wages, not because they want higher wages for housework.
- 4) There are others of us who see BF as campaigning for payment for housework and that the main difference between us and the Power of Women collective is a difference of practice not theory. That is that we criticise their method of working and using campaigns and demos and publicity, but their main analysis is correct.

For BF women to find themselves again I think it is vital that we sort ourselves out organisationally. But ~~xxx~~ just as important is the need to sort ourselves out politically and to find ways of developing a generalised theory, while given the organization as whole priorities to be developing in practice. We cannot continue with our ideas of the relationship between theory and practice which demands that, because we have a very wide-ranging view of the importance of feminism, this means that we all have to be involved in everything at once.

The centrality of housework

First of all, to go back to the centrality of housework. The framework which we used to define our ideas about housework at the conference was the following:

- 1) Socialization of housework, paid for by the state, controlled by the working-class
- 2) Guaranteed independent income for all, including housewives
- 3) Housework to be paid for by the state, whoever does it and wherever it is done
- 4) No sexual division of labour, either inside or outside the home.

It is the first and third of these that people have taken to mean as wages for housework. But to me, they mean something much more fundamental to the structure of the socialist revolution we are creating, which is that society must carry the responsibility for its own arse-wiping and reproduction. This means more than just paying someone to do the work but actually taking responsibility for the best way of doing it. Capitalism has created the role of housewife, now socialism has to abolish it.

What we are fighting for in BF is the recognition that we are not sure exactly how the revolution will take place in advanced industrialized capitalism but we are going to make sure that within that process the necessity of servicing and reproducing the work-force is not undervalued, even (especially) in a socialist society. Since we are a revolutionary socialist organization, we must be looking for a material basis on which to challenge this contradiction of capitalist society i.e. the creation of the role of housewife, while at the same time not recognizing its importance. We must also find ways of collectively organizing that challenge. This means recognizing housewives as a group much more specifically, i.e. the women who have to stay at home to look after kids, who do part-time jobs, who have more time to confront their housing problems, to support other women against the SS. I say we should recognize them as a group of workers, produced by the structure of capitalist society, rather than at the moment, where we emphasise more the all-pervasive presence of housework in women's consciousness. This reasons why SI say this, and why I think it's important as to the way in which Struggle Notes develops, who it's aimed at, is that I think women who spend most of their time at home are the only ones who have the time and space to explore in detail the material structure of their exploitation and to organize collective ways of fighting against those structures. This is not to say that women at work are not oppressed by their responsibility for housework, not that most of their emotional energy is at home, but it is a fact that women at work spend most of their time there and it is the area of greatest collectivity. The major part of the struggle against capitalism of women at work will be in the workplace. From this it follows that we need to be focussing on a much more conscious organization of houseworkers to act as a vanguard in the struggle against privatized housework for women at work as well as men. Struggle Notes has begun to do this, particulally with sections like the Hazards of Housework, but we are still muddled as to the function of Struggle Notes.

A good socialist blames her tools

We need to be clearer about the concrete situation that fucks us up in doing the housework, like the lack of collective facilities and social investment, because if we confine the criticism too much at the level of ideological oppression of women we have no way of understanding or using tow extremes of t of the fight against women's exploitation and gender stereotyping. The first is when women take on jobs that are seen as a man's province such as the group of 'Women in Construction' in London, where women are fighting against the odds to become carpenters, bulders, electricians etc. This is a very important struggle because it has moved beyond the bourgeois stage of women making it in a man's world as individualistic professionals, to a collective movement which challenges capitalist definitions of a womans potential and also begins a collective struggle against being used as acheap and inexperienced labour-force in lousy job conditions, in the same way as alll immigrants are used until they fight back. This struggle also applies to women in 'women's' jobs, they are fighting against their work conditions, not housework. (I found it disappointing that in the women's literature, this last point had been missed. The description of the fight of the woman who had been sacked from a building site for swearing in Spare Rib concentrated very much on her being picked on as a woman, and being victimised for something which, if she had been a man, no-one would have taken much notice of. It was only the version I read in the Guardian that expanded much more on the fact that she had to take a job on a disorganised and very exploitative building site because no-one else would havex her. The Guardian was much more clued up on the development of a collective feminist struggle against lousy conditions in the building industry)

The second struggle against gender-typing (which is saying that there are some things that men, and men only do, and other things that women, and only women do) is when men are doing women's jobs i.e. staying at home to look after kids or being seen in public doing the washing or actually working out the shopping list instead of just carrying the shopping bag. In BF we have left

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ourselves very little space to encourage and build this commitment to women's liberation, other than within our private relationships and internal organization because Struggle Notes is a women's publication and yet has appropriated all the experience of writing about housework.

Looking at the complexity of a houseworker's situation at home, I would say that here is one of our mistakes as a revolutionary socialist organization which is aiming to deepen and thus unify the struggles of every section of the working class. We have laid too much emphasis on the money and not enough on the structure. Unlike other areas of our struggle, say in industry or education, where we have tried to make a concrete link between fighting for the money to live and fighting for control of our work, we have neglected the second struggle for the first around housework, so that our ideas on about restructuring, about what a shorter working week would mean for a houseworker, about 'productivity', all these are very underdeveloped. This is partly because houseworkers are isolated and unorganized and therefore we have very little class movement on which to develop our theory but also because, in the absence of that practice, we have let ourselves be carried away by the demand for more money as a solution within the present context of housework. If we had taken clarifying our work around house work more seriously, as militants in BF in other sectors have taken their own work, we might still be in a weak organisational position, in the sense of organizing the revolutionary sections of the class, because houseworkers are scattered, but we would be a lot clearer about the possibilities within the perspective of BF as a whole.

To be written in the future

Another mistake we have made in BF is the muddling of the fight against housework as work, as the unnecessary drudgery that is laid on people by capitalism, and the struggle for ideas around different ways people can and will relate to each other as the socialist alternative develops. The most frequent running together of these two things is over housework and child-rearing, because the endless slavery of cleaning in not the same as the difficulties of rearing a child in a capitalist world with a socialist consciousness, or even a rebellious working class consciousness. But this discussion will have to be continued later, as otherwise this won't get into the next internal bulletin, even in the form that it is.

Footnote

This is a description of what I got out of the two books I mentioned in the introduction, which I didn't put into the main article so that people could read it or not as they wanted, but it explains some of the ideas I'm using.

There is a really good description of how women came to be relegated to the home in Anne Oakley's book 'Housewife' which shows how the servicing work came to be separated from the productive work. Briefly, what she says is that before capitalism the unit of production was the extended family. Both cottage industries and the business of running the household and rearing children were carried on in the same place, business took place in a room that served as a bedroom, the hall was used for both cooking and social relaxing. This meant that women could and did play an important part in running businesses, and having a family was not seen as a burden. On the contrary, women had an egalitarian status and could enter craft guilds in their own right. With industrialization however, the production of goods was taken out of the home, since the home and extended family could not contain the machinery nor provided the capital for mass production. After the initial slaughter of the working class in the factory, capitalists realised that kids needed food and rest to grow up to be the next generation of workers and therefore someone had to stay at home to look after them. Women lost in that era of class struggle since the protectionist factory acts that were fought for by the working class, also served as the shackles of their oppression. (This contradiction doesn't mean that those acts weren't a progressive gain for the working class) Since that time (the 1840's) there have been upsurges

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of struggle to gain the recognition that housework is work, that it is a crucial part of the division between the class that produces surplus value and the class that takes that surplus value. We should remember that the struggle around housework and feminism is not new, although that struggle is now at a moment of strength. Also for each individual woman the experience of the women's movement is new and earth-shaking.

Now, to come a bit closer in time, I want to refer to another book, this time about China, called Woman-work By Delia Davin. I recommend this book for a good look at the relationship between revolutionary organisation and the organizing of women but the point I want to make here is about her conclusion. This is that compared to other underdeveloped countries, China had done well both in the development of women's role in the workforce and in the raising of women's consciousness, and fighting for equal status. It compares less well with other industrialized countries. The sticking-point is the high price of collective responsibility for housework. When resources were few it was cheaper for China to use women's social energy to work hard at home, At one point during the 1950's this even became part of national policy 'Thrifty household management is of great and basic importance, to the cause of our socialist construction.' This emphasis was only dominant for a brief period, but Chinese women still have a long way to go before housework is seen as a collective, social responsibility, and the Chinese revolution thinks it can afford this socialization of housework.

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