

BIG FLAME DISCUSSION PAPER FOR THE NAC CONFERENCE 1980

Corrie is defeated. But we cannot afford to relax. Both because of the threat of further restrictive legislation, and also because all this time our limited rights to choose are being systematically eroded by the present cuts in public expenditure. With cuts in the NHS our formal rights under the 1967 Abortion Act become meaningless. Not to talk of the way in which our right to have children is ever more structured around economic dependency on one man, with maternity leave under threat, and nursery provision - inadequate as it is - being slashed. Moreover, health care and social services generally are being drastically reduced, with the assumption that these services can be provided out of "love" by women in the community. The limited rights we have won as women to enable us to begin to participate in waged work outside the home are increasingly being withdrawn and instead our choices are further and further limited, with the only real option being to stay at home - where we are expected to work harder often in poor housing with little money. At the same time - connected to it - there is a moral backlash against a freer morality and experimentation in living situations and sexual relationships. All the time, women are being cast more sharply into our traditional role of wife and mother. Juvenile delinquency and societal problems generally are blamed on women going out to work and 'neglecting' children. Considered most irresponsible of all is the sexually independent woman - women who choose to have children on their own, or to live collectively, or who are lesbians.

It's important to evaluate the campaign against the Corrie Bill so as to develop our politics and learn what is effective. Certainly, some crucial issues were raised during the course of the campaign which need collective discussion now, if we are to consolidate politically and move onto the offensive. Two central issues which we'd like to raise here are 1) our relationship to the labour movement and within that our attitude to the involvement of men and 2) the problem of defensiveness, reformism and to what extent NAC should be a "single issue" campaign.

1) We want NAC to be a mass campaign. That means involving the labour movement as much as possible. But on our terms, and from a position of strength. There seems to be a thread running through NAC politics that suggests only the organized labour movement has political muscle. In this view, the women's movement becomes a 'cultural' phenomenon - lacking social power we must call upon the

services of the labour movement to take up our case. This then sets up a polarity between the women's movement and the labour movement which can be seen in discussions such as the one on the possibility of a festival around a woman's right to choose that took place at a national CAC meeting when a 'serious', 'political' TU demonstration was offset against a 'lightweight' (frivolous even?), all-women festival. We as women have political muscle. It is just that traditional, male-defined ways of doing politics have identified the only real struggle as at the point of industrial production and have denied struggle around reproduction, both in terms of control over our bodies and in the nurturing and socialisation of the next generation.

What we need is a new orientation towards the labour movement. One that is based on an understanding of women's autonomy; that is, on the understanding that women are oppressed and that it is only we who collectively can work out what we want and how we are to fight for it. Autonomy is strength. It is not a failure to cope, or a desire for privacy. It is a political strategy for deciding policy and setting the terms. That is not to say that women organizing alone are at once rid of male models of politics. But in asserting the positive need for autonomy we are at once challenging the old terms of political debate.

In a sense NAC is a place where we are theoretically and in practice creating socialist feminism. And to do that we must be firmly rooted within the women's movement, with a clear perspective on women's autonomy. That means that local groups should be women only, calling on men in practical ways when thought collectively to be appropriate; and calling on men from a feminist perspective. As Jan Parker states in her paper ("Women's Autonomy is not Separatism"), we don't want TU support just on the basis of their own, economist arguments in support of abortion rights, but also on the basis of our arguments for choice and sexual freedom - for women's liberation. We need to break down the polarity between the women's and the labour movement concretely by revealing the real contradictions between men and women, at the same time as building unity based on a common investment in creating a socialist society. Although, importantly, there are divisions within the labour movement itself - and we should perhaps be orienting ourselves more at rank and file groupings than at the leadership. What common investment do we have with Len Murray?

What is important to stress, too, is that in asserting women's autonomy in NAC we are not suggesting our politics should be inward-looking, or

narrowly defined as a "women's issue" without relation to other issues. On the contrary, a clear perspective on autonomy gives us the political basis for making links and for reaching out to women in a clearly thought out and positive way. Our politics make much more sense when they clearly assert women's oppression as central to our lack of rights to choose, and they can feed on the anger and frustration that all women experience. And autonomy does not stop us encouraging the support of men, or relating to the labour movement - it just means that we approach them on our own terms. But it is important that we clarify collectively the nature of the support we want from men - how they can help in practical ways and in raising the issue of a woman's right to choose and supporting women who do so in the other areas of their political activity; how they can challenge one another on their sexism etc.

2) A socialist feminist perspective on abortion cannot see the fight for abortion rights as "single issue". A woman's right to choose whether and when to have children involves much more than access to free, easily available abortion facilities without legal or medical restrictions - it is about control over our bodies and lives as women; it is about our sexuality, our right to sexual pleasure and a sexual identity independent of reproduction; it is about our right to have children in ways that we choose and about having the facilities and resources to enable those choices : maternity leave; community controlled nursery provision; better housing; better general health and health care; more money; and much more. It is against forced sterilisation of black and particularly unsupported white working-class women, against dangerous contraceptives such as depo-provera, against lesbians being denied AID or custody of their children.

By concentrating on the struggle for abortion rights alone, out of the context of women's lives and experience, we can weaken our own case. Certainly, the issues raised by Eileen Fairweather's article "The Feelings Behind the Slogans" in Spare Rib suggest that it is essential to situate the struggle for abortion within an understanding of our material choices and that abortion evokes all sorts of aspects of women's oppression which must be dealt with in an emotional as well as a political way within our campaigns. A man chanting, "What do we want ? - Abortion ! - When do we want it ? - Now !", on a demonstration understandably can have a most alienating and upsetting effect. And, in a sense, by concentrating exclusively on defeating a particular anti-abortion bill we can set up that situation. Abortion is seen in isolation. Almost as an end in itself.

Being "single issue" also keeps us on the defensive. We react to attempts to restrict the 1967 Act instead of actively asserting a total political perspective on a woman's right to choose. This means the terms are set for us and we often end up arguing and fighting within an unacceptable framework. It means we choose strange allies: our only criterion is their attitude towards retaining the '67 Act, not how they reach that position or argue the case (Tony Benn, David Steele). This is particularly important given that arguments in favour of the '67 Act can often be centred on the need for some women of particular social classes to have abortions, that is, on eugenics. It also means that a great deal of our activity is centred around the parliamentary process for the abortion issue is not seen as linked to the total way in which our choices are limited materially and ideologically. This can mean we are essentially reformist; and, importantly, our support slides away once an individual bill is defeated. We haven't educated our support into a full enough understanding of a woman's right to choose. We fail to make the links, for instance between fighting for abortion rights and fighting the cuts, or the employment bill, or racism and fascism.

The question is how can we as the National Abortion Campaign fight specifically for abortion rights, but at the same time fight for a woman's right to choose in its fullest sense. It is easier at a local level. Campaigns for day-care can provide the opportunity of raising questions around the sort of health care we want, around what choices we have to have children, around childcare, sexuality. NAC can be represented on local anti-cuts committees. It can support campaigns around childcare. It can ask to speak on the importance of fertility control at anti-racist and anti-fascist committees and campaigns. It is vital, too, that NAC relates the struggle for abortion rights to the broader struggle by women for control over our bodies and lives and links in with campaigns in the women's movement. We need to show how campaigns around pornography and sexist advertising etc., are part of the same struggle for control of our bodies and for our own definition of sexuality. Rape and violence against women is about men having power and control over our bodies. NAC has a part to play in supporting campaigns such as Reclaim the Night, Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Centres etc. Also in challenging the notion of legitimate sexuality being heterosexual and about reproduction. In fighting for abortion, we are fighting for a sexuality freed from the fear of pregnancy. And a freed sexuality involves being able to re-define traditional sexuality and to have the choice to have lesbian relationships without discrimination. Our opponents feed on repressive attitudes towards sex and

fears of sexuality. We need to be quite clear on the issues ourselves and fight for our sexual politics in a positive way.

At a national level, positive legislation is a central concern, if we are not always to be fighting restrictive legislation. But we must remain aware that a change in legislation cannot grant a woman's right to choose. It is better for us to support initiatives on the part of ALRA and LARC etc., rather than put in a lot of our own energies. Crucially, in the present climate of political defeat and demoralisation, we must go onto the offensive, in a mass way, with a clear socialist feminist perspective about the real choices we want as women, linking in with other feminist and socialist campaigns and demands.

