

# 3. On The General Strike

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Today the feminist movement in Italy is opening the campaign for WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK. As you have heard from the songs, as you have seen from the photograph exhibition, as you have read on the placards, the questions we are raising today are many: the barbarous conditions in which we have to face abortion, the sadism we are subjected to in obstetric and gynaecological clinics, our working conditions – in jobs outside the home our conditions are always worse than men's, and at home we work without wages – the fact that social services either don't exist or are so bad that we are afraid to let our children use them, and so on.

Now at some point people might ask, what is the connection between the campaign we are opening today, the campaign for WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK, and all these things that we have raised today, that we have exposed and are fighting against? All these things that we have spoken about, that we have made songs about, that we have shown in our exhibitions and films?

We believe that the weakness of all women – that weakness that's behind our being crossed out of all history,

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that's behind the fact that when we leave the home we must face the most revolting, underpaid and insecure jobs – this weakness is based on the fact that all of us women, whatever we do, are wearied and exhausted at the very outset by the 13 hours of housework that no-one has ever recognized, that no-one has ever paid for.

And this is the basic condition that forces women to be satisfied with nurseries like the "Pagliuca," "Celestini," "OMNI." ["Pagliuca" and "Celestini" – both notoriously brutal nurseries. "OMNI" – the State nurseries which are poorly equipped and badly run.] This weakness forces us to pay half a million lire for an abortion and this, let's spell it out clearly, happens in every city and every country – and on top of that we risk death and imprisonment.

We all do housework; it is the only thing all women have in common, it is the only base on which we can gather our power, the power of millions of women.

It is no accident that reformists of every stripe have always carefully avoided the idea of our organizing on the basis of housework. They have always refused to recognize housework as work, precisely because it is the only work that we all have in common. It is one thing to confront two or three hundred women workers in a shoe factory, and quite another to confront millions of housewives. And since all women factory workers are housewives, it is still another matter to confront these two or three hundred factory workers united with millions of housewives.

But this is what we are putting on the agenda today in this square. This is the first moment of organization. We have decided to organize ourselves around the work that we all do, in order to have the power of millions of women.

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For us, there, the demand for wages for housework is a direct demand for power, because housework is what millions of women have in common.

If we can organize ourselves in our millions on this demand – and already there are quite a lot of us in this square – we can get so much power that we need no longer be in a position of weakness when we go out of the home. We can bring about new working conditions in housework itself – if I have money of my own in my pocket I can even buy a dishwasher without feeling guilty and without having to beg my husband for it for months on end while he, who doesn't do the washing-up, considers a dishwasher unnecessary.

So if I have money of my own, paid into my own hands, I can change the conditions of housework itself. And moreover I will be able to choose when I want to go out to work. If I have 120,000 lire for housework I'll never again sell myself for 60,000 lire in a textile factory, or as someone's secretary, or as a cashier or usherette at the cinema. In the same way, if I already have a certain amount of money in my own hands, if I already have with me the power of millions of women, I will be able to dictate a completely new quality of services, nurseries, canteens, and all those facilities that are indispensable in reducing working hours and in enabling us to have a social life.

We want to say something else. For a long time – particularly strongly in the past 10 years, but let's say always – male workers have come out to struggle against their hours of work and for more money, and have gathered in this square.

In the factories of Porto Marghera there have been many strikes, many struggles. We well remember the marches

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of male workers who started in Porto Marghera, crossed the Mestre Bridge and arrived here in this square.

But let's make this clear. No strike has ever been a general strike. When half the working population is at home in the kitchens, while the others are on strike, it's not a general strike.

We've never seen a general strike. We've only seen men, generally men from the big factories, come out on the streets, while their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, went on cooking in the kitchens.

Today in this square, with the opening of our mobilization for WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK, we put on the agenda our working hours, our holidays, our strikes and our money. When we win a level of power that enables us to reduce our 13 or more working hours a day to eight hours or even less than eight, when at the same time we can put on the agenda our holidays – because it's no secret to anyone that on Sundays and during vacation time women never have a holiday – then, perhaps, we'll be able to talk for the first time of a 'general' strike of the working class.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Originally published in *All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework and the Wages Due*. Falling Wall Press. [1975]. Dalla Costa gave the above speech at a 1974 celebration of International Women's Day in Mestre, Italy.