

Our Fight is Your Fight

BLACK and anti-imperialist struggles, in a similar way to the womens movement, have challenged traditional marxist thinking.

The classic marxist model expected all countries to follow the same path of development to advanced capitalism. Only then would the industrial proletariat be strong enough to lead a socialist revolution.

But instead of the flowering of mature socialism in Britain, Germany or the US, major movements or transformations have mostly grown in poorer, 'less developed' countries.

People in those countries have said they cannot wait for a western-type proletariat before the revolution is allowed. Its very development is held back by their relationship to a wider system of exploitation -- capitalist domination on a world scale.



They have therefore thrown up new kinds of leadership and new kinds of movements. They have asserted their national or ethnic identity as a way of mobilising a mass movement against foreign domination.

Black movements in Britain have also insisted that class struggle is not enough -- racism has to be fought explicitly in all parts of society, including left wing groups.

NATIONALISM

But nationalism is full of ambiguities and contradictions, even when it sees itself within a broader framework of power relations. Every nationalist movement has to decide which aspects of its culture are holding it back, and which are positive and progressive. 'All culture is composed of strengths and weaknesses', said Amilcar Cabral, a famous black nationalist. 'No culture is a perfect finished whole.'

These contradictions are no better expressed than by the position of women in anti-imperialist movements.

Imperialism oppresses women in specific ways. They are often left to struggle on their own to keep the pieces of family or community together, while the men are forced into unemployment or transient work. They are used as ultra-cheap labour. In many third-world countries and in Britain, black women suffer population control programmes imposed from above which are dangerous to their health. If they

Racism



and the

Women's

Movement

I SOMETIMES get the impression that some white feminists refuse to support anti-racist, anti-imperialist struggles because they define the black movement as male-dominated. It seems ridiculous to define black men as more sexist than white men. This is patronising and racist.

The black movement is no more or less male-dominated than any other 'movement' in this society -- eg the Trade Union movement, the gay movement, the revolutionary left . . . The only way women fight that is by building our strength and solidarity with other women within those struggles. The right kind of support from white feminists can help us in our fight against sexism in the black movement -- but it has to be on our terms.

It's important to recognise the privileges which white women have in relation to black women, both in Britain and throughout the world, based on the exploitation of black women by imperialism.

Many women in the West have access to contraceptives, which may leave a lot to be desired, but which have given them more freedom of choice than their black sisters. They should understand that they have these facilities at the expense of countless third world women who are used as guinea pigs for drugs and IUDs, and as dumping grounds for the contraceptives that western women fight to ban.

Even in this country, contraceptives like the Depo Provera injection known to have dangerous side effects, are used on black women. The fact that many black women cannot speak English well is taken advantage of, and little attempt is made to explain the effects of such drugs.

Black women do not equate 'westernisation' with 'liberation'. We do not need to be 'brought up to the level of liberation' of our white sisters. We are, like white feminists, fighting sexism, but in the context of a wider fight against racism and imperialism.

Some feminists say things like, 'Why

- Women and Imperialism



try to enter this country or live here in peace, they suffer a combination of racist and sexist abuse.

Anti-imperialist movements have often ignored the specific oppression faced by women, and have rejected criticism of their own practice on the grounds that feminism was a 'foreign import'. They have defended female circumcision as a 'cherished part of our heritage', refused to contemplate abortion, or expected black women to follow silently and bear children for the sake of the revolution. The white left managed to realise that racist and imperialist oppression needed to be fought explicitly, once those movements became a focus for radical action, but they wouldn't extend that logic to sexism. A new kind of reductionism was showing — to race or foreign domination.

But women have joined men in these movements for very good reasons. They have begun to challenge the men about their sexual blind-spots, making new demands for the place of women in the society they are fighting for together. In Iran, women used the chador as a symbol of opposition to the Shah, but have opposed the attack on them by fundamentalism. In Egypt, women are coming out against female circumcision, and are reclaiming their Arab identity. In Ireland, women have raised feminist issues within the republican movement, and Irish feminism has grown. And in Britain, black women have started to organise autonomously in groups such as OWAAD.

At the same time, these women know that their oppression must be seen in a wider context. 'Women's problems are political,' said Nawal El Sadaani, an Egyptian who condemned female circumcision in her latest book about women in the Arab world. 'To isolate them from the social, political and economic structure that surrounds them avoids the main issue — the liberation of men and women alike from exploitation.'

SOLIDARITY

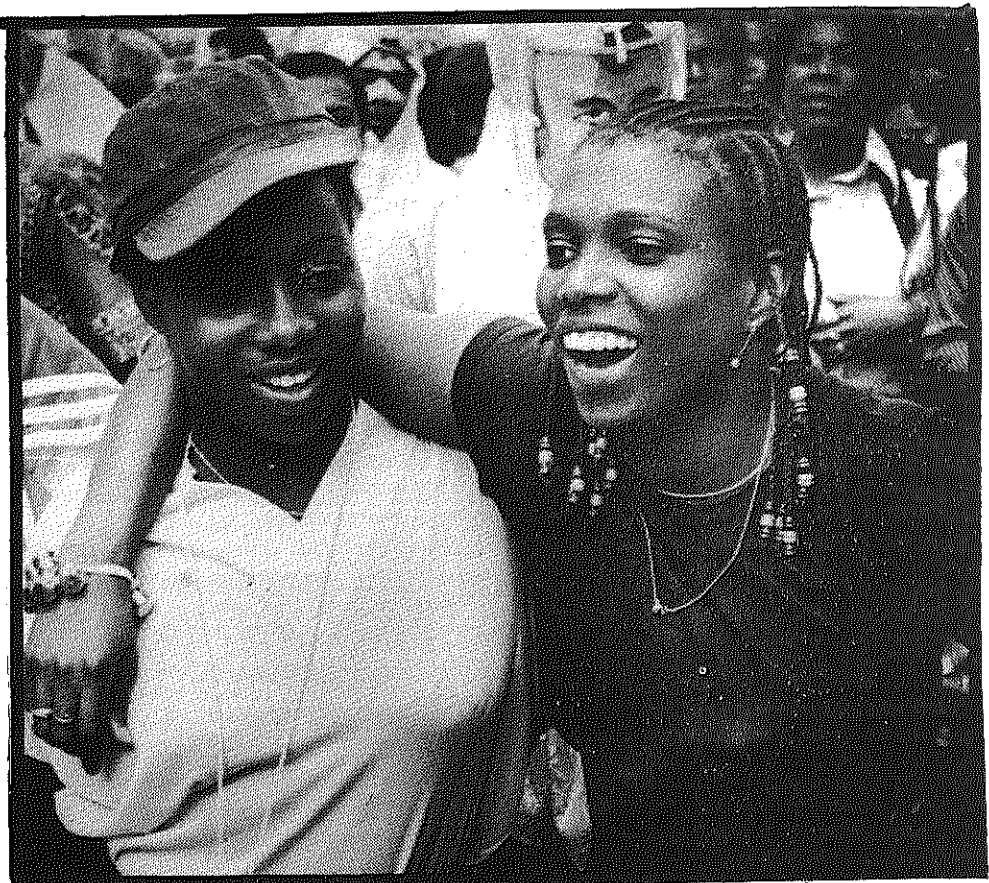
As socialist feminists we want to extend our solidarity to these women, not just for their sake but because a victory for them is a victory for us. We have recognised that women sometimes need to fight against much more than sexism alone, and that sexism can take many different forms. This means that although we have a lot to share, we also have a lot to learn. White socialist-feminists from imperial powers cannot tell other sisters how they ought to struggle. Real solidarity is won when divisions are recognised and fought, not ignored.

At the same time, we must continue to organise against sexism within anti-imperialist movements, and broad fronts such as 'Troops Out' or the ANL. They are as divided by sexism as the trade unions, mixed left or any other organisation in our society. But that doesn't mean we must have nothing to do with them. They must always be forced to realise that if the women aren't free, then no-one is free.

should we get involved in campaigns against the Immigration Laws, when they could involve supporting arranged marriages?' The arrogance of these women amazes me. They make the chauvinist assumption that they know better and can organise black women's struggles on our behalf. They also assume that marriage in the West is somehow less oppressive to women, somehow less 'arranged'. If 'arranged marriages' are to be challenged they will be challenged and are being challenged by Asian women on their own terms.

It's not a question of laying the blame for all this at the feet of white women; but it is important that they accept some collective responsibility for it and begin to support black women's struggles on that basis.

LUCY COX



MARK RUSHER (IFL)

Grunwicks received a great deal of publicity. It was hailed as a show of the potential strength of the rank and file, and many involved in the mass pickets saw themselves as the mighty labour movement giving 'muscle' to the weak Grunwick workers. But they didn't see the areas where they themselves were weak and had a lot to learn from the women at Grunwicks. The fight involved much more than union recognition — it was about racism and sexism. It was a golden opportunity to tackle these divisions within the trade union movement but very few took this opportunity. The Asian women were somehow invisible, or referred to as 'those brave little Asian women.'

The strike at Chix raises the very same problems, but it hasn't become as widely known. For eight months Asian women at the Chix bubble gum factory in Slough were on strike over union recognition. They won their fight — but at the cost of many jobs and a bitter lesson in union sell-out.

'WE ARE HERE..



Chix Mass Picket

MARK RUSHER (IFL)

CONDITIONS AT CHIX were notorious.

Wages were 90p an hour for Asian women and £1.10 for white women. 120 workers had to share four toilets. Only five minutes was allowed for washing on the day shift, and the night-shift workers were allowed no time at all. There were no medical facilities like a sick room, and no sick pay. Asian women testified to discrimination from the white supervisors.

Things came to a head when one of the women lost her baby because the management refused to give her a lighter job. It was then that the women decided to join a union and change things.

107 out of a workforce of 120 joined the GMWU last summer. The managers refused to negotiate with the union, threatened to sack the workers, and recruit non-union labour. So on 10 October, 96 workers, all Asian and mostly women, went on strike.

Since the strike started, various strike-breaking tactics have been used. Scab labour was brought in at £2.50 an

hour; other wages went up to £1.45 an hour. Supplies of glucose were delivered at midnight by a firm of TGWU workers, under police escort.

The women picketed day and night, often in freezing weather. They were offered a settlement which included their main demand for union recognition. However, only 19 of the 45 remaining strikers would return to their jobs — Chix management had abolished the evening shift.

Some women will be going back to increased wages of between £1.26 and £1.40 per hour. But those women who have lost their jobs feel rightly that they have been betrayed by the very union officials of the union they fought so hard for. They won the right to be in a union but lost their jobs.

The women at Chix decided that the settlement agreed by Jeremy McMullen, GMWU full-time official, without consultation with them, was not good enough.

They challenged Mr McMullen at a meeting to renegotiate for full reinstatement of the women strikers.

He tried everything to convince them to accept the redundancies but the women refused to back down. So the strike was back on. The picket restarted and the ban on supplies resumed.

Mr McMullen didn't know that, had he failed to back down, the women would have offered him the thanks he deserved: in the shape of a dozen eggs stashed away in their saris. And a special garland of broken, old and torn shoes would have been placed around his neck to show their contempt and disgust with him.

But, despite the determination of the women, their union officials have finally backed down. They have accepted a deal which is little better than the original offer. The evening shift women have not been taken back, though they have been guaranteed jobs if the shift is restarted in the future.

The 19 women who have returned to the factory will have to use the strength they built together in the strike to make sure the union acts in their interests, now they've won the right to be members.

'FROM THE POINT WHEN WE APPLY TO ENTER BRITAIN TO THE POINT WHEN WE ARE ACTUALLY LIVING HERE, RACIST, SEXIST AND ANTI-WORKING CLASS LAWS CONFRONT US, PUTTING BLACK WOMEN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE DUNG-HEAP IN THIS COUNTRY. IF WE KNOW THIS, WE MUST FIGHT IT.'

'Black Women in Britain Speak Out' — OWAAD Conference talks

VARIATIONS in our shades of blackness are of little importance compared to the common experiences we share in racist Britain. To the racist on the street we are all 'niggers' because we are not white.

The first Black Women's Conference, in March, 1979, organised by the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), was one of the things recently that has given me strength and solidarity. I felt proud to be a black woman and glad to hear other women say things I had felt and said.

The racist immigration laws make no distinction between Asians and Caribbeans. Calling ourselves black is a sign of unity and in times like this black women certainly need unity if we are going to effectively resist all the attacks being made on us.



Heathrow: Demonstration to protest virginity testing on Asian women.

ANGELA PHILLIPS (IFL)

'COS YOU WERE THERE'

THE IMMIGRATION LAWS are racist and sexist and are used both to keep as many black people as possible out of Britain and to harrass and intimidate those already here. Since 1971 it has virtually been impossible for a black person to settle in this country. The only people who can come and *live* here as of right are 'patrials' — mainly white people with family connections.

The immigration rules defining eligibility and conditions of entry have recently been tightened up. Black women have now been denied the right to bring their husbands or fiances to live in Britain. Men can bring their wives and fiances, but it is all at the discretion of immigration officials who decide whether they 'believe' that you are someone's wife. Women can wait for years and years, vainly trying to be re-united with their husbands.

The Immigration Act gives police and immigration officers powers to arrest without warrant anyone suspected of breaking immigration controls. They can be detained indefinitely, with no right to bail or hearing, and deported without trial or effective right of appeal. In practice this means more powers to harrass all black people in Britain — to search, arrest, intimidate, question, imprison, and finally deport.

Many black women are being subjected to vaginal examinations on the pretext of determining their age or whether they are married or single. X-rays are also used to determine age, often on pregnant women, with no regard to the damage this could cause to their babies. Zahira Galiara was pregnant when she arrived in Britain in 1976. The immigration officials refused to help her when she went into labour and maintained that she was trying to avoid immediate deportation. The baby died as a result.

The campaigns to defend two women — Nasira Begum and Anwar Ditta — have succeeded in warding off the threat of deportation and denial of entry to children. All the rules are loaded against a chance of a fair hearing, but it's crucial to show support and increase their chances of winning their cases.



CARLOS AUGUSTO

IRELAND 'If it weren't for the women'

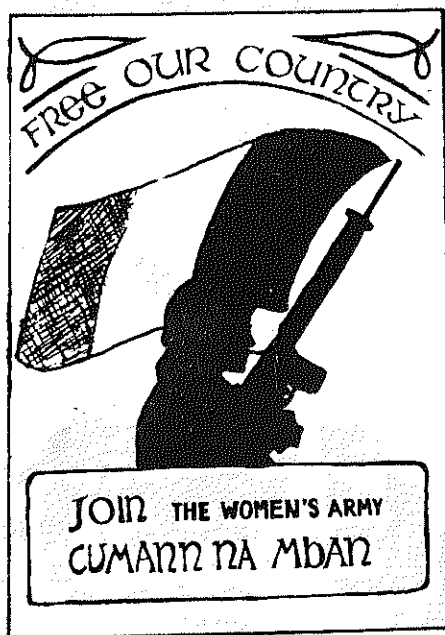
WHY IS THERE A WAR going on in Ireland? Why are there hundreds of women and men in jails in Ireland and Britain suffering terrible conditions? Why is there such confusion about Ireland in general in the socialist and the women's movement, let alone in the population as a whole?

In many ways socialists and feminists can understand the effects of imperialism and racism on black third world countries, and black people here in Britain, easier than how Ireland has been, and still is, colonised.

Irish people have been coming here to work and live since the 18th century because Britain has systematically pillaged and destroyed Ireland long before mass emigration began, and still holds back and distorts Ireland's own economy. Irish people are still the largest immigrant group in this country and the least visible, partly because they are white. The Irish population has also been intimidated into silence about the situation in the North, especially since the Prevention of Terrorism Act, so they are not as vocal about their situation as black people are.

PARTITION

The war in Ireland now is a legacy from the imposing of Partition in 1921 against the wishes of the majority of Irish people. The Civil Rights Movement, which began in 1969, demanded votes, access to housing, and jobs for the nationalist minority, from a state which had systematically discriminated against them. These demands couldn't be met without the state itself being dismantled. Protestants fought violently against the threat to their privileges, and as they had done several times since partition, the republican communities were forced once again to organise against these attacks. British troops were sent in to control that escalation and soon turned their guns on the nationalist communities, giving up pretence of being in the North to 'keep the peace.'



THE BRITISH ARMY

It was then (in 1970) that the IRA was reactivated to defend the nationalist communities against the British army, the RUC and sectarian attacks.

The British army's job was to keep Ireland safe for British and foreign capital and also for NATO forces on the Western edge of Europe, which meant in reality maintaining protestant power in the North.

The war is not a religious war. Over the years in discussions with the people in the republican communities it has always been made clear to us how they saw the conflict —

'The British Government . . . gave the Protestants some prestige and vestige of power knowing full well that while one section of the community dominated the other and discriminated against the other, that they could maintain their complete hold on that community. This is what they are doing in England between the black community and the white. . .'

Maeve, Derry, 1977

THE IRISH WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The development of the Irish women's movement has obviously been affected by the issues and forms of struggle taken up by women in other countries over the last 10-12 years.

Male domination of anti-imperialist forces in liberation struggles in other countries is one thing that women have looked at. In Ireland and England, feminists have been, and still are, very critical of the male dominance of the republican and anti-imperialist forces in Ireland, and women both inside and outside the women's movement raise the question of violence and what war does to people (see Scarlet Women, issue no II, June, 1980).

PROTEST !!

**TURF LODGE WOMEN
WANT BRITISH TROOPS
OUT**

You killed Leo Norney
You tried to kill Sandy Lynch
You tried to kill Brian Stewart
You are destroying our children

**WE WANT LIFE PROTECTED
—NOT DESTROYED
WE WANT TRUTH — NOT LIES**

*Your actions destroy life.
Your words are lies.
Bring your Criminals to justice.

LEAVE THE DISTRICT

From the beginnings of the Civil Rights struggle we have tried as feminists as well as socialists in Big Flame to bring out, learn from, and support the way women in the North have been involved in the struggle. This means looking at Catholicism — its relation to Republicanism — and its attitude to women. In Ireland, North and South, women are regarded as 'Mr So and so's wife'. . . 'the person

DEREK SPIERS (REPORT)



International
Women's Day
picket
of Armagh Prison,
March 1980

who bore the children, cooked and cleaned. . . . But the situation in the North has shifted, and is still changing women's lives —

' . . . Since the onset of the present struggle, women have been pushed from their homes in defence of their children and husbands. This evolution . . . has made women very conscious that they do have a role to play. That they are not simply the breadwinners, or the mother or the housewife.'

Maeve, Derry 1977

WOMEN ARE GETTING STRONGER

But we can't lay down a prescription for how women in Ireland should organise, or how they conduct their debate around these issues. As women living in the imperialist country we must continue to be aware of our position in relation to women in the colonised countries, and also be aware of how women's position in Ireland has been made worse *because* of imperialism.

For instance, pay and social security is lower, unemployment much higher, and essential services, rent, gas, electricity, all cost much more. Women also face constant harrassment from the security forces (increasingly of a sexual nature) as well as the deaths, torture and imprisonment the British Army brings to their door-step every day. In fact, it is *because* women are getting stronger and playing a more active role in the

North, that there will be a continuing escalation of violence against them. As a British Army captain said to a woman in Belfast:

'We've enough information to pick up any man any time. But it's the women who are harbouring, the women who are keeping their doors open. It's not the talkers we want, it's the doers, it's you women we are worried about. If it weren't for the women, the war would have been over years ago.'



PRIORITIES

The priorities of women in Ireland are not and cannot be the same as ours. We also would argue that in order to support Irish women in their struggles, it is essential for women in this country to understand the situation of women in the nationalist communities, which is where the British occupation is most fiercely resisted.

This is not to say that the work and development on women's issues in Ireland (which has developed work on many other issues — women's aid, abortion, women's rights etc.) outside of these areas is irrelevant. It is not. But we believe that socialist feminists should see that the struggle of women in Ireland must be seen in the overall

context of how imperialism has affected Ireland.

'You'll find more women getting involved in various movements — community associations — tenants' associations, prisoners groups, more women in fact have been pushed to the front, and now that they're there, I think they'll stay there and they will not take a back seat any more.'

Maeve, Derry 1977

Today women in the North are as active as ever — speaking for and marching with the Relatives Action Committees, resisting the horrendous conditions and harrassment inside Armagh jail, and organizing constantly against the British Army in their communities.

We must continue to take our perspective of support for their situation into our work in the Troops Out Movement, and into the women's movement through the various women's groups working on Ireland and on imperialism. We must also continue to argue for the troops to leave Ireland.

'We are very glad that our struggle has been taken up in Britain...If more people got involved then Britain would have no other alternative only to take her troops home, where they belong.'

Roisin, Belfast 1977

MARY JAMES

Anti-racism: 'Diverting the real struggle'?

THIS is a personal account of my own experience in the Brighton Anti-Nazi League in 1978. I was involved in a Women against Fascism and Racism (WAFAR) group which tried to make connections between the fight against sexism, racism and fascism, but which ended up provoking the wrath of both the male left and the radical feminist current. Similar experiences across the country were highly formative for countless feminists and socialists, and sum up some central problems which plague us today. . . .

The Brighton Anti-Nazi League was set up in the late Spring of 1978. The first few public meetings were packed with interested people. It seemed as if the ANL was becoming a focus for all anti-racists and anti-fascists in the town, and an outlet for activism which had never existed before.

The Brighton Women's Liberation Group had held a discussion on women and fascism earlier in the year, and quite a few women were keen to form a group which would help us to contribute to the anti-racist and fascist movement in a distinctive feminist way. Brighton WAFAR (deliberately called WAFAR rather than WARF) was set up as an autonomous group affiliated to the ANL, and began to thrash out our own perspective.

THREAT

We felt that fascism was a direct threat to women and gays because its whole legitimacy rested on authoritarian and patriarchal traditions. The fascist notion of fulfillment through sacrifice to the family, nation and race depended on women's support and compliance with eugenic laws for the 'master race', which enforced motherhood on some and sterilisation and abortion on others. The appeal against 'moral degeneracy', a cornerstone in its ideology, is built on people's yearning for something to fight for, twisted by their fear and loathing of moral freedom and personal choice.

The NF propaganda of today is often aimed at women in their communities, distorting the real dangers they face about 'mugging' and rape by making the black man the scapegoat for what is considered a crime against white man's property. The National Front use racism in a sexist way, and sexism in a racist way, and they do so deliberately and frequently.

This meant that the sexual politics of racism and fascism concerned the whole movement, not just an isolated sector under direct attack. Reactionary groups have always understood the force of people's fears about morality, sexuality, and the whole gamut of 'private lives', and they have exploited them very well. But just as in the 30s, the left was using only economic terms to account for

the NF and state racism, which meant it was fighting reaction with one hand tied behind its back. We were concerned to show that our present struggle might falter or fail if it didn't develop its understanding of the enemy.

SEXISM AND THE ANL

At the same time, we wanted to make the ANL aware of some disturbing occasions of sexism within the local campaign. In a demonstration, some people from the march came along to the WAFAR banner and started taunting the women by shouting, 'Tits against the Nazis, women against the wall.' At a Rock against Racism gig the Fabulous Poodles sang awful sexist lyrics which were meant to be a 'joke'. Cries of protest led them to reply, 'You're too narrow baby', and the incident led to a letter of protest and another step towards creating Rock against Sexism. Within the ANL meetings, babysitting was not available, and many women were intimidated by the few people who did all the talking.



Britain's patriotic 'National Government' in the 1930s played upon the same female stereotype as the Nazis.

MULTIRACIAL EDUCATION is a grave threat to our children's future. White children in our inner cities are now frequently in a minority. About two-fifths of Inner London's 30,300 annual births are born to mothers who were born outside Britain.

National Front News — aimed at women

Groups like ours had sprung up around the country. Some links were made with black and third world women, and most groups produced leaflets for the many ANL and CARF demos. Strong women contingents were present at Lewisham and Grunwicks, and their experiences provoked a serious examination of 'strong boy' tactics on the left. Several national and regional WARF meetings were held.

Our overall aim was to start a wide-ranging discussion about the nature of racism and fascism. But the whole concept of the ANL militated against it. It had been organised with the narrow target of 'exposing' the nazi nature of the Front. But that left most of us unequipped to argue head-on with anyone about why immigration laws should be opposed, how the police were harassing black communities, why the economic problems of the country had nothing to do with black immigrants or Jewish financiers, or why it wasn't better times when 'men were men and women were women and children were seen and not heard.'

The deficiencies of the ANL have been analysed at great length in other places.* Black groups pointed out the weakness of attacking the 'glamorous' nazi enemy while ignoring the mundane old everyday state racism which affected black communities the most. Socialist groups were uneasy about the lack of an alternative explanation for unemployment and urban decay. But almost all the dissenting parties seemed to unite in fury at our very existence, let alone our audacity in wasting their precious time with the 'red herring' of sexism.

Our group won a motion asking for the branch's support and for a quota of women on the co-ordinating committee, but it was obvious that many people either didn't understand or didn't like what they heard. Rather than sweep it under the carpet, we scheduled a general meeting to broaden the whole debate.

*See the Big Flame Pamphlet *The Past Against Our Future*.

Some people made a wilful attempt to misunderstand us, but there was also a lot of genuine puzzlement, and we ourselves were not always clear about what was a relatively new and sophisticated area.

It wasn't easy to help people make the sorts of leaps in consciousness required, and the job acquired an added level of complexity because of the debate taking place within the women's movement.

PATRIARCHY

Some women felt that fascism was simply a more extreme version of the misogyny we already experienced. The best tactic was therefore to go on as before, fighting patriarchy, since its fall would bring everything else with it. WAFAR was criticised for working within a male-dominated organisation, or for working in a mixed group at all. They proposed to picket ANL meetings, and we launched into a long debate.

WAFAR argued that patriarchy had to be fought in its specific forms, and that racism and fascism had to be explicitly opposed. Bad as things were now, we'd soon notice the difference if fascism took power. We felt we should extend our solidarity to groups oppressed in different ways, and support their struggles. I also felt it was arrogant to assume that everyone understood our arguments — it was a challenge, not a compromise, to make them more accessible.

SHOWING OUR COLOURS

Against this, it was argued that solidarity couldn't be extended to women's class enemy — men — but this seemed to be as unhelpful as the classic marxist reduction to class. In my own case, I felt threatened as a Jew as well as a woman. I knew that, just as years of oppression didn't magically make Jews incapable of oppressing other groups themselves, women could end up on the wrong side of the fence if we didn't show our colours. And although I didn't see myself arguing sweetly and patiently with each individual man, I felt that if people couldn't make some kind of leap from their own experience and catch even a glimpse of their implication in the oppression of others, there was no hope for any of us. Whether we liked it or not, the forces of reaction lumped us all together — blacks, Jews, libbers, gays — so unless we wanted to meet in that big concentration camp in the sky, we had to work out a basis for fighting the common enemy.

Despite the intensity of this debate, however, we felt more accountable to other feminists, whatever our disagree-

ments. The stimulation created by their challenge played a crucial part in our development.

When I returned after a 7 month absence in May 1979, the entire mood had changed. The Tory government had just stepped in, and large sections of the left stopped ANL work and made anti-cuts campaigns the new priority. The local SWP had accused the WAFAR group of sending people away from ANL meetings by 'diverting the real struggle', but this seemed a poor excuse for the deficiencies of the ANL itself.

WARF groups seemed to be fizzling out, and other non-aligned socialist-feminist activities were in a state of quiescence. Some women stuck to single-issue campaigns, some joined left-wing organisations, and some decided that the women arguing against mixed work had been right after all.

Looking back, I think it was this vacuum which led me to look more seriously at Big Flame. I was looking for ways to develop a socialist feminist theory and practice, and it seemed the only organisation on the left serious about giving equal weight to both.

What lessons did I learn from our efforts? I always felt that we were on the right track, but I did end up feeling that the group emphasised the problem of sexism within the ANL at the expense of

directing its activity outwards. We were never able to show as clearly as we would have wished how to integrate our perspective into a collective ANL practice.

But we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves about fighting for such a challenging perspective. I hope that we have all remained determined to go on fighting — on our own terms.

SUE GREENBERG

This article has been slightly revised for the second edition



MARK RUSHER (IFL)

Match of the Day - Sex v Class

THROUGHOUT this pamphlet we've tried to understand how women are exploited and oppressed, often *specifically* as women. Isolated in the home, or doing 'women's jobs' at work, challenging our role as male-defined sex objects or facing the constant threat of male violence, our struggles unite us all. But we know all women do not share exactly the same oppression. So what is the relationship between sex and class? Must one or other come first?

Though many marxists today agree that women are oppressed, they understand this in a way that subordinates women's oppression to class oppression. As it has been mostly interpreted and applied, marxism sees women's oppression as due to her position in the family. As a housewife she works at home without wages, economically dependent on her husband.

So marxists argue that women's subordination can change through her entering the labour force. There she can become strong and fight together with men for equal rights as a waged worker. There she can join the struggle against capitalist exploitation. (By exploitation we refer to the use of someone's labour for another's profit, by oppression we refer to a power relation which systematically subordinates another.)

Most feminists, however, have found this marxist perspective inadequate for understanding women's oppression. We have criticised the way it has ignored

sexuality, reproduction and the sexual division of labour, and looked at production only in terms of the wage relation. We have argued that you need a new analysis to understand women's subordination. Women's oppression preceded capitalism and has continued after anti-capitalist revolutions. This is why many of us have found it useful to talk of 'patriarchy' to refer to the systematic subordination of women in all known societies, although we do know it has taken different forms in different periods.

Many socialist feminists, fighting both

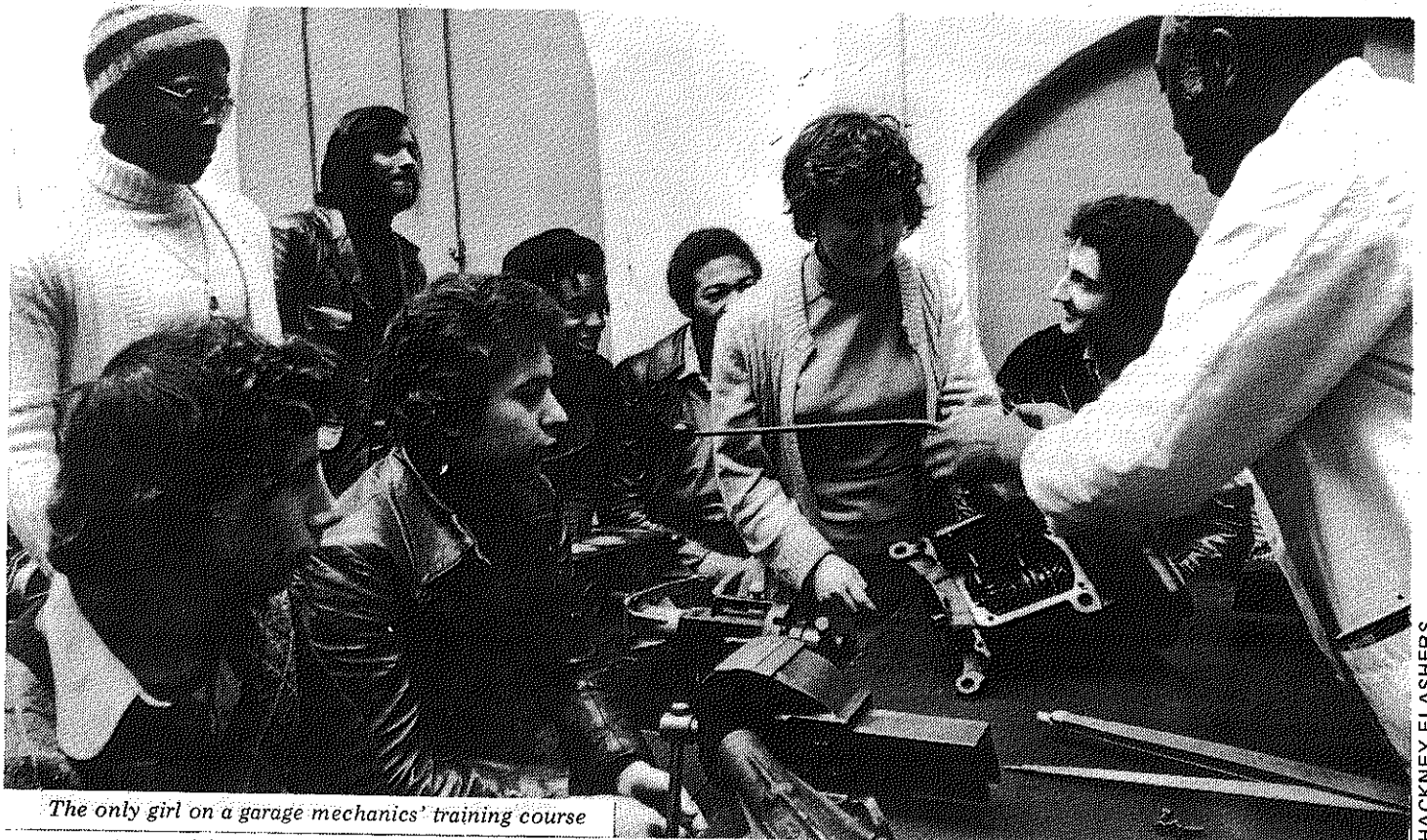
IDEOLOGY

sex and class oppression, have always tried to develop marxism in a way which attempts to explain the specific oppression of women. Reading, for example, the writings of Juliet Mitchell from the late 60s,¹ we came to stress the importance of ideology and culture in understanding women's oppression. We saw how the *meaning* of what it is to be

female, and how we are socialised into femininity, makes us feel and be seen as inferior and dependent on men.

We wanted to undermine the creation of gender roles, and stress the importance of the struggle against the ideology which created them — a sexist ideology. ('I'm gonna be an engineer', we sang along with Peggy Seeger.) Marxism, we said then, had failed to stress the crucial importance of ideology in producing women's oppression.

Soon other socialist feminists attempted to make a more direct material connection between women's oppression and class exploitation. Some of us took up the arguments of Mariarosa Dalla Costa² and others, that women's domestic labour in the family served as unpaid work for capitalism. Capitalism could not survive without us. Women create and care for its present and future labour force — 'reproducing labour power' — for next to nothing. So there were many debates about domestic labour. We began to demand increased family allowance for women, and a small but significant 'Wages for Housework' group emerged. We could now see ourselves as both ideologically oppressed and in some sense materially 'exploited' through our unpaid domestic labour.



The only girl on a garage mechanics' training course



The controversial anti-Corrie demo in October 1979, when women charged to the front in protest against TUC control.

More recently, however, feminists, including many socialist feminists, have come to stress that it is not just capital — the ruling class — which benefits from the oppression of women.³ All men benefit from it. All men can expect to be cared for and cushioned by women. Like all power relations, male domination is maintained by a whole range of sanctions, and in the end by men's use of violence against women.

CHALLENGE

Once we talk in this way, we are offering a fundamental challenge to the dominant form of marxist politics. We are saying that the hierarchical division of labour, sexual stereotyping and men's control over sexuality and fertility are not simply a product of class divisions. They represent a separate power relation which we need to analyse and destroy.

This means that women need to organise autonomously as women, not just to overcome the class divisions within capitalism and fight them more effectively. We also need to fight for our own interests simply as women. Marxists have tended to deny that working class men benefit from the oppression of women, to deny that there is a conflict of interests between men and women, and not

necessarily just in the short term.

It is because they accept and benefit from the sexual division of labour, that men, even within the trade unions, have done *next to nothing* to change women's inequalities at work. At times they have opposed women's struggles. The sexual division of labour has meant that despite women's participation in the labour force, men still hold the better paid, more interesting and secure jobs. While at home men still expect women to play the major role in caring for them and their children. For example, fighting patriarchy means challenging the trade union practice of simply defending existing privileges at work. It also means fighting against pornography, against rape, against everything that helps maintain the power of men over women.

INTER-CONNECTED

So we no longer say that feminism is important only insofar as it seeks the overthrow of capitalism. However, as socialist feminists, we do see that capitalism and patriarchy are inter-connected and feed off each other. The oppression of women does serve the interests of capital — creating a super-exploitable group of workers both in and outside the home. Moreover, it is central to ruling

class strategy today to strengthen the ideology of sexism as a way of maintaining existing class relations.

At times of economic recession, when capitalist profits are threatened, women are the first victims of the attack on the working class. We are hardest hit by cuts in public expenditure, forced even more to shoulder the social burdens of sickness, disability, mental stress, care for the young and old, which should be shared by all. We are hardest hit by unemployment. But this can all be made to seem acceptable, if most people think a woman's place is in the home anyway.

BIG FLAME

Big Flame has always supported the struggle of oppressed groups such as women, black people, gays and youth, in organising autonomously against their oppression. We have also stressed that the working class is itself divided, and that some sections of the working class have a stake in preserving what privileges they have in relation to others. We fight to overcome this, and strengthen class struggle.

We have gone on to argue that only the oppressed groups themselves can adequately analyse and understand their

own oppression. For this reason, we accept both the organisational and the political autonomy of oppressed groups. So the first thing we've come to learn from the women's movement is that left groups have still to develop an adequate analysis of women's oppression. Women in Big Flame are part of the women's movement, and there we want to help to create a socialist feminism which can transform marxism.

An acceptance of women's analysis of their own oppression has also meant accepting the new areas of politics raised by feminism (and the new left). Big Flame has therefore argued that political struggle must cover every aspect of people's lives. Only this way can we take seriously people's feelings that politics has nothing to do with them.

Oppression occurs in every area of our lives, even our supposedly 'private' lives. Issues such as how we live, who we live with, how we relate to each other sexually, how we relate to and care for children, older people, the sick, the sort of work we do, the conditions we work in — and not just the wages we get for it — are central to our vision of socialism. We are not simply fighting for equal rights for women. We are fighting for a total transformation of existing social relations, where we all share in the caring and servicing work women do, as well as the creative and productive work more typically associated with men.

The women's movement always

stressed the importance of challenging all hierarchical and authoritarian relations *now*, whatever their cause. We knew that the main part of any resistance against oppression is the growth of individual and collective confidence. This meant finding new ways of organising which encouraged the maximum participation of everyone, and tried to avoid the creation of elites and leaders.

In Big Flame we also try to avoid structures which create permanent leaders, and find structures which strengthen the position of women in the organisation. We have always tried, through our summer schools and other activities, to include children, young and old people in our socialist practice. We stress the importance of sharing responsibilities and supporting each other.

This is no easy task. For most of us it involves trying to change ourselves and the ways we have learned to relate to each other. But we do believe that an anti-sexist organisation must not only work to build a strong women's movement, it must also integrate the insights of feminism into its own theory and practice.

GOING OUTWARDS

Women in Big Flame also take the perspectives of our organisation into the women's movement. We see that there is *not* just one, single, determining cause of all women's oppression. As black women and working class women we are more

oppressed, though sexism affects us all. Attracting more women to feminism, and joining with them in their struggles, means taking up class issues and fighting racism. We want to help build a womens movement that has a wider basis of support, both in the workplace and community. We see the need to go outwards from our womens groups, which make us feel stronger to raise feminist issues in broader campaigns.

The womens movement can strengthen all women to resist the Tory strategy, which attacks all women as a part of its overall attack on the working class. We relate this attack to the international upsurge of monetarism, at a time of intensified anti-imperialist struggle throughout the world.

There still remains much to be done to deepen our understanding of the relationship between sex and class. But we feel clear that neither should be subordinate to the other in our theory or practice. In our day to day activity we live out the contradictions and seek ways to overcome them.

NOTES

1. Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: the longest revolution', *New Left Review*, No. 40 (Nov-Dec 1966, and *Woman's Estate*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1973)
2. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Women and the subversion of the community' in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* by Dalla Costa and Selma James, Falling Wall Press, 1973.
3. For example, Heidi Hartmann, 'The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism', *Capital and Class*, Summer 79, No. 8.



ANDREW WIARD (REPORT)

Big Flame Publications



If you found the ideas in this pamphlet interesting, please feel welcome to contact the Big Flame national office for further information or any of the following publications

An Introduction to Big Flame 10p

Our politics, history, structure and publications.

Draft Manifesto for a New Revolutionary Organisation 1977

25p. A comprehensive manifesto written to clarify our political positions and as the basis for discussing the organisation of a mass politics tendency.

Labouring under the Tories or a Socialist Alternative? 20p

A new pamphlet which argues the need to challenge the defensive basis of existing politics in the working class movement and stress instead rank and file socialist alternatives in industry, the public sector and social life in general.

Century of the Unexpected 65p

Another new pamphlet which puts forward new insights about the nature of 'socialist' societies arguing that they should be seen as a new mode of production — state collectivism.

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A non-sectarian critique of Trotskyism which links the strengths and weaknesses of Trotsky's original ideas to the theory and practice of current Trotskyist organisations.

The Crisis in Education 30p

An analysis of the restructuring of education which argues for taking struggles further than fighting the cuts and wage battles. Sections on teachers, pupils and parents, as well as the experience in Russia and China.

A Close Look at Racism and Fascism 20p

Articles from the Big Flame newspaper covering such topics as fascism and women, the National Front and youth, police harassment and black people, and includes an interview with A. Sivanandan.

Sexuality and Fascism 30p

A reprint of papers from a Big Flame dayschool on women in Nazi Germany; women and the NF; and the NF and masculinity and fascism.

The Past Against our Future: fighting racism and fascism 50p

A new pamphlet which examines the history of racism and fascism, the role of racism and fascism in the present crisis and their relationship to sexism, the history of the anti-racist, anti-fascist movement including the lessons to be learned from the ANL and the future directions the struggle should take.

Just published:

Organising to Win 60p

This new pamphlet examines the way five years of Labour government has seriously weakened workplace organisation in many sectors. It looks at the new Tory offensive against rank and file workers. The aim is to show why we've been losing so many struggles at work and how we can start winning again.

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Big Flame Journal (the forerunner of Revolutionary Socialism)

Issues one and two 30p each

Women's Struggle Notes Issues two to five 15p each

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All these publications can be obtained by writing to Big Flame, 43a Hardman Street, Liverpool 1
Make cheques and postal orders payable to Big Flame Publications and include 15p for each item ordered

Big Flame *Walking a Tightrope* August 1980 ISBN 0-906082-05-6

Second edition September 1980

Published by Big Flame, 43a Hardman Street, Liverpool 1 London office: Room 265, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1

Typesetting by Community Typesetters, 2 St. Paul's Road, London N1 2QN (01-226 6243)

Printed by Whitechapel Press Ltd (TU), 100 Whitechapel, Liverpool 1 (051-708 7466)

Trade distribution: Southern England—PDC, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1 (01-251 2976). Northern England and Scotland:

Scottish and Northern Book Distribution Co-op, Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, W. Yorks (042284-3315)

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WALKING A TIGHTROPE



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