

IS A MEN AGAINST SEXISM POLITICS NEEDED?

Big Flame has had several mens' meetings (I attended one in 1975!), in some branches men meet separately, some writing has been done, attempts have been made to set up a general sexual politics group. The problem of a men against sexism class politics is urgent. I would like to see a men against sexism meeting for BF soon - preferably Easter, perhaps Coventry, hopefully arranged by February NC - and this article is partly a contribution to that. It is a hastily constructed skeleton, timed to get in the Jan 81 Discussion Bulletin, and it'll need a lot of fleshing out.

This article is also a continuation of my article on AUTONOMY* (Conference Bulletin 1, 1980). That suggests that the foundations of white imperialist and racist power needs to be challenged, as does mens power over women. I'd be pleased if comrades would look back to that article.

* AUTONOMY having two meanings - working class autonomy from capitalist development and the autonomy of specifically oppressed sectors (women, black people). It needs the second for the first to be possible.

John Kimberley (B'ham - Nottm BF) Jan 81.

INTRODUCTION

This isn't a personal account, it doesn't look at the depths, the feelings or fantasies of men and sexism. Neither does it cover all of the areas we'd want to discuss. Nor does it summarise the range of actions - the levels of political understanding - that flow from men against sexism politics. (I understand Ray Wilson has listed these and although I've not seen it this article could be a complement to RW's). This is not meant to be any of these things, although I believe they are all very valid. This is supposed to argue the need for a men against sexism politics to working class struggle.

IS A MEN AGAINST SEXISM POLITICS NEEDED? YES.

Men constantly benefit from our material advantage over women

- eg having jobs with more pay and with more chance to be flexible such as tradesmen as well as being less liable to get laid off
 - eg being able to walk home at night without being stared at/assaulted
 - eg expecting women at home to do a double shift, that is housework and waged work, generally looking after our needs including our sexual needs, the house, the cooking, the shopping, the kids.
 - eg being looked after by women in 'womens jobs' like health & cleaning
 - eg not having direct responsibility for contraception - if a woman does not want to get pregnant it must often be her who takes precautions and in a whole lot of ways gets her body messed up.
- And there are millions more examples.

These issues constantly re-appear in the daily life of everyone. They are a fundamental source of division within the class struggle.

WOMEN REGULARLY OPPOSE MENS POWER.

As BF Women's Commission wrote in "The Women's Movement and the Movement of Women" in 1977 "...feminism...is something that many women are beginning to fight for in their own way"

In various ways and with various degrees of success (sometimes very little success) women are fighting the demand to work harder, to have no wage at all or no money in women's control; are resisting cuts and the way they put more load on women like childcare (no nurseries) or health care; are organising for a Womans' Right to Choose and against Violence against Women and so on.

BF's theory of this (as written up in a number of places but including WE WON'T PAY (BF Journal 1), Organising at Lesney's (in Red Rag) and WALKING THE TIGHTROPE) argues that this sexual politics is within working class life and working class struggle. Unlike the dominant current on the English Left - Trotskyism - we don't argue that the working class can only organise in a limited economic^{way} or that it needs the shining light of the Left to bring sexual politics to the working class. Our view, however, doesn't say these struggles are easily collectivised or won.

MEN REACT

Millions of times every day, men respond to the flickers and the flames of womens power. I SEE IT AS THE JOB OF MEN IN THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT (like us in BF) TO (1) DISCOVER HOW MUCH OF MEN'S RESPONSE IS NEGATIVE, that is, an attempt to tighten the grip on women and HOW MUCH IS PROGRESSIVE, that is to find solutions which respect womens freedom.

Secondly, a communist men against sexism politics needs to build up the progressive side as much as possible. There's a lot of new political thinking to be done. (and challenge the reactionary response)

FACILING UP TO DIVISIONS WITHIN THE WORKING CLASS

"Some sections of the working class suffer from a double oppression - for example, women are oppressed both as members of the working class under capitalism and as women" BF Manifesto page 3

"Women have demanded and created their own autonomy - using their own organisations to develop the struggle for their own needs against capitalism.

In Big Flame we welcome this fact, and see it as a positive step towards class unity, since there can ^{only be} effective unity when all major sectors of the class are strong enough to ensure that their own demands are taken up." BF Manifesto page 7

The working class will never have the power to bring about the kind of communist revolution we want unless the hierarchy of power between rich nations and poor, white people and black, men and women, old and young, skilled and unskilled, waged and unwaged is seriously challenged. As the process of womens resistance at a time like now (or a womens offensive in a future period approaching dual power) ^{develops} then the communist movement must be able to encourage men to seek progressive and not patriarchal solutions to the undermining of mens power.

So, from a working class unity point of view I believe the case is clear that men should take responsibility for developing a men against sexism politics (see Ray Wilson's article), knowing what supporting feminism means, being able to put this into practice.

KNOWING WHAT FEMINISM MEANS

I think the hoped-for men against sexism meeting at Easter would do well to begin to establish what the implications are for supporting feminism and reading WALKING THE TIGHTROPE and A DAY RETURN TICKET would be useful. In the 'TICKET' Violet Potter sums up a 'good theory of womens' oppression' as

- (i) accepting that procreation is as important as material production
- (ii) that procreation is not responsible for womens' oppression
- (iii) therefore the relationships around procreation need examining
- (iv) that woman-man roles are social constructed

(v) it means looking at family,, violence, economic power and at different ideologies (of sexuality, domesticity, motherhood, romance) and this would have to be specific and historical before connecting it to class.

MEN'S POSITION IS CHANGING

A sketch of men's changing relationship to women and to capitalism is to be found in BF's SEXUALITY AND FASCISM (pages 13/14). It suggests that the 'progressive' role that capitalism had for women in the boom (1945 - late 60s) of having a little more access to paid work meant a major challenge to the identity of the man as breadwinner, head of the household etc. Shifts and de-skilling further challenge mens traditional identity. Britain's power in the world economy - a decreasing power - is important here.

THE NEW SITUATION of protracted crisis (glorified by the Tories) is both an extension of the past and a radical break. It is becoming a lot easier for a politics of Women Back to the Home, Hobs for the Fathers of Families etc to gain ground. Womens' material position is greatly undermined. On the one hand this strengthens mens power, keeping women trapped. On the other hand, rising unemployment threatens mens role as breadwinner and authority. Now to turn to some practical situations. In each of them we need to know what kind of reactionary male solutions to oppose and what progressive ones to promote:

UNEMPLOYMENT

The thousands of people facing long-term unemployment for the first time are less able to use work as an 'escape' from an unrewarding dream-family life. All the tensions of the family will almost certainly get worse - leading to frustration, increased violence against women, more difficult relationships between kids and parents, older children less able to get away from home, and everyone poorer. There needs to be ways of taking these issues up openly in campaigns around employment and building organisations that challenge and offer an alternative to male violence and so on.

AT HOME

Of course, all the above applies, it's perhaps worth adding that all the Welfare State cuts could mean men standing by while women do the extra work - however, we should encourage sharing of housework and campaigning for services.

AT WORK

Again, the relative power within waged work of men is currently allowing many men to stand by while women lose (part and full time) jobs. These issues need to be fought openly. Raised by men in unions and workplace groups.

FASCISM

It's very obvious at the moment how the fascists are recruiting loads of young skinhead lads for 'the boover!'. The right re-inforces male violence and protectiveness, the communist movement needs to offer support for forms of organisation, eg among the unemployed and youth, where respect for women is the norm and is a good experience.

On the other hand, some men (HOW MANY?) are happy to start sharing the housework, to support womens struggles at work...is there the chance of a revival of Rock against Sexism? Setting down these problems will help find answers.

CONCLUSIONS

I'm sorry if this doesn't seem practically grounded enough. If a men against sexism meeting can be arranged for Easter I feel one of the first things to do at is provide examples from many areas of life where male solutions to the general crisis are being imposed and where antisexist communist ones could replace them. But anyway, if Big Flame as a general organisation is trying to be pro-feminist then a lot of ideas will have to be worked out and put into practice. I'd like to see a collective statement eventually emerge.

Finally, I would recommend that cdes try and have a look at WE WON'T PAY WALKING THE TIGHTROPE WOMENS MVT AND MVT OF WOMEN SEXUALITY AND FASCISM or A MINIMUM SELF-DEFINITION OF THE ANTI-SEXIST MENS MVT (in DB early 1980)