

SOCIALIST-FEMINISM TODAY

1. 2 years of Thatcher's government has left many feminists, like so many others, more deeply isolated and alienated from collectively organised politics. What we tried to explain in our pamphlet is that the Tory attack on women is both economic and ideological. We can see that, not only are women losing their jobs at twice the rate of men, but the effects of the cuts in public spending fall solidly on the backs of women. As they withdraw money from the needs of the very young, the old, the sick, disabled and distressed, women are forced to take on ever increasing domestic responsibilities. To make us accept this, the Tories need to resurrect and reinforce all the old sexist ideologies. The result is that with jobs disappearing, nurseries closing, school meals threatened, maternity rights under attack, women are being forced more firmly back into the home, into isolation and dependence.
2. So the pressure on women to go outwards and link up our struggles with all those fighting the Tories is very strong. But this also creates great problems for feminists. For we know that women must also ~~XXXXX~~ organise autonomously. That it is essential that we lead our own struggles as women, that we are clear on our feminist ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ perspectives. Otherwise, we have little hope of feminist goals being raised in any joint struggle. Feminist struggles inside united fronts are never easy, and never have been.
3. Faced with this situation, what do feminists do. One big problem is that the feeling of ^{there} being a single, central Women's Movement is very weak. The divisions amongst feminists, between radical and revolutionary feminists, non-aligned socialist feminists, women in left groups, and black and anti-imperialist women, run very deep. We disagree on priorities and tactics. Is it men, or is it capital, or is it racism and imperialism that constitutes the main enemy?
The suspicions of many feminists towards the left groups represents real disagreements in theory, the way to understand and theorize women's oppression, and disagreements in practice, the way to mobilise resistance.
Again as we explain in our pamphlet, Marxists are seen as having always subordinated any understanding of women's oppression to their understanding of class oppression. So women's oppression is seen as a consequence of our confinement to the home, making us economically dependent on men and unable to participate equally in waged labour. Our oppression serves only the interests of capital, we are super-exploited workers in waged work or the home. And it's true, our oppression does serve the interests of capital.
In practice this has meant that many women in left groups have tended to emphasize primarily women's rights to waged work and their struggles out at work. Feminists have been accused by women in left groups of failing to relate to and organise working class women. Feminist demands for abortion rights, maternity rights and childcare facilities have been supported by the left as campaigns in support of women's right to waged work. But women's responsibility for child care, her lack of control over sexuality, issues of rape within marriage etc. and the whole ideology of women as mothers and sex objects for men, is not usually a part of the left's support for "women's rights". Or again issues like rape and violence towards women have been seen by most of the left as resulting from men's frustrations under capitalism, increasing unemployment etc.
4. But feminists have developed a whole different analysis and practice. First of all, we have always rejected any economic analysis which said that women would become more powerful simply by gaining certain rights which enabled greater participation in waged work and wage militancy. (This was the reason many feminists were suspicious of the Working Women's Charter, back in '74, because it

said nothing about the sexual division of labour, and other predominantly left initiated campaigns.) We knew that women do not enter the labour market on equal terms to men, the gender segregation of jobs, already determines that women will be primarily confined to those jobs low in pay and status. Sexual divisions at work, with women subordinate to men, simply reflect, rather than necessarily challenge, those in the home.

So what feminists have always talked of, and increasingly over the last 5 years even amongst socialist feminists, is that there is a separate power relation between men and women, which must be analysed and fought as such. Male domination over women is distinct from and not reducible to capitalist class relations. Male supremacy rests on a distinct material and ideological basis, related not primarily to the organisation of relations of production, but to the organisation of reproduction, childcare and sexuality. Because ~~Marxists~~ Marxists have concentrated on the former, to the exclusion of the latter, they have been unable to theorise women's oppression. So it was feminism, in particular, that introduced the spheres of culture, the family, sexuality and personal life into political debate and ~~struggle~~ struggle.

What this means in practice, is that ~~elg~~ in fighting for abortion facilities, feminists have emphasized not just the right to choose whether to have children, but emphasized the whole area of sexuality, that rape is legal within marriage, that sexuality is conceived of in totally male-defined terms of heterosexuality and penetration. We argue that women's control over reproduction and sexuality is essential, not just for our right to work, but for controlling directly the power-relation between men and women, and the ideologies which express it.

Or, in relation to child-care -- we don't just want more nurseries so that more women can go out to work. We want to challenge the sexual division of labour, whereby "mothering" is by definition a woman's job. Until we do this, the existing sexist stereotypes of women as caring and dependent (tied in with our feelings of inferiority and helplessness) and of men as rational and aggressive will not begin to be undermined, nor the power relations they create.

Or, when feminists have confronted male violence and rape, we have stressed the need for refuges for women, rape crisis centres and long term strategies geared to women's needs, to building women's feelings of autonomy and resistance, tactics which some women on the left have dismissed as relating to women where they are weakest. We stress the fact that all women are controlled at all times by real threats of male violence, and rape, that fierce misogyny and abuse of women is not just a product of unemployment or low wages. That the way sexuality is constructed in this society makes violence against women inevitable. That sexist pornography oppresses and degrades us, distorting our sexuality and our images of ourselves, while feeding misogyny.

5. So within BF we have emphasized that feminist theory and practice remains distinct from that which predominates on the left, and even more strongly in the labour movement as a whole.

But in the early 70s, feminism seemed to be setting the pace in many struggles, e.g. by '74 the government and general public were forced to admit the problem of battered women, rape became an issue, a number of community nurseries run by feminists were funded, NAC was very strong. Whereas today women are neither leading, nor winning, many struggles. In this situation, many women have retreated to individualistic rather than collective feminist solutions.

Some women argue our priority must be rebuilding a strong and unified women's movement. E.G. a number of women at the Beyond the Fragments event last year felt it wrong to be looking for possibilities of uniting as feminists with others in struggle.

3.
Because of divisions in the women's movement, they said, no alliance with men on the left, whoever they were, was yet possible. Not unless it was to prioritise discussions of patriarchy, men's domination of women. We should first of all be re-building our separate women's groups.

The need for women to be leading our own struggles against male domination, to meet autonomously & build our own theory & practice is irrefutable. Neither the labour movement or the left have ever taken feminist politics seriously until forced to by the growth of a strong women's movement & consciousness. The struggles of women in the labour movement & left have been immeasurably strengthened by the work feminists have been doing for years on the outside. But while women must organise & lead feminist struggle, we must also realise there is no single, unified network of feminists, no single entity, 'the women's movement', which can direct our struggles wherever we are. Nor is there likely to be. Though women are all oppressed as a sex, there is not just one single source of oppression all women face. Women face a multitude of oppressive power relations, divided by nationality, race, class, age, sexual preference & other factors. Priorities will be decided by the situations we face, though feminists hopefully aim to support all women in struggle for a better life. So today there are many separate women's groups, Black women's groups, young women's groups, women against imperialism, a women's state policy group, women & the politics of health group, women & education etc etc. But these do not constitute a united whole.

One choice some feminists make is to work as separate women's groups on particular issues, e.g. in anti-nuclear work. But if we make this choice, feeling it pointless to waste our energies fighting male domination, or for feminist perspectives in mixed groups, we still face problems. If we are fighting for changes which affect all women, not just ourselves, we can't really cut ourselves off from wider movements of struggle & united front work. As women in NAC found, we must also engage in struggles which draw the widest possible support, drawing on the labour movement & the left. The TUC abortion march last year illustrated the problems & contradictions we face. A great victory in being the first ever TU march on a non-industrial issue. Upsetting to many feminists because of the TUC's total domination of the march, & insensitivity to women's demands for women & NAC banners in the lead, more feminist speakers on the platform etc.

A 2nd choice, more popular amongst socialist feminists has been to join in general mixed campaigns such as CMD or END, struggling to raise feminist issues there. Or to become more active in the TUs or some other left group, fighting for women's politics there. By far the commonest strategy of individual s-fs that I'm aware of, apart from increasing isolation and retreat, from struggle, is to join the Labour Party.

And recently there's been some feminist activity in the LP. Campaigning women's sections have been reformed in some areas. A women's rights study group created. And perhaps most significantly for us, a Women's Fightback Campaign, attempting to organise women militants, & fight Tory attacks & raise women's issues.

It's good that there are more feminists active in orgs more based on the working class. But the dangers are obvious, even more than the marxist left, the LP and Labour movement, insofar as they take up feminist issues, treat them as equal rights issues. Feminists have always rightly fought for reforms at state level which increase our independence from men, but our overall attack on the sexual division of labour & male power, raising questions of the family, culture, sexuality & personal life is not easily raised in these structures. Here feminist politics easily become peripheral to the call for unity against the Tories, & emphasis on an industrial fightback against unemployment & wage cuts.

The recent Festival Against the Tories, in which Women's Fightback was centrally involved, highlights the problems. Many women's groups, including women in BF, opposed any participation because it was an event which included men. I don't think this was the main problem with the event at all. I'm glad men could come to the Festival, & see the strength & richness of an event organised by women. Men are not going to go away. Most women, through parents, siblings, children, race & class ties (whether or not we are heterosexual) do have important ties with men. The situation is not equivalent to that of worker & boss. Men can change. Some men have changed a bit. And we have got to work out what demands to make on them, to force them to

most women, feminists or not, are mostly concerned with & talk about. Issues of housework, food, our homes, health, sexuality, male violence, & our personal relationships. Once again these seem to be dismissed from the serious realm of politics. (There is also the problem of the chauvinism of much of the left of the LP & their failure to support anti-imperialist struggles e.g. in Ireland).

Nevertheless, I think the Festival was a great success, & I'm glad we participated in it. I believe we have no choice but to join in broader campaigns, to work with left Labour & the labour movement. It is to encompass such alliances that we are in Big Flame, to be a part of developing a total politics, & to work in solidarity with all in struggle, & develop an international political perspective & practice that includes all forms of oppression. At the same time we have no guarantee that feminist perspectives will live & grow, even within BF, except by us also working within autonomous feminist groupings on particular issues, & insisting that the men we work with support feminism as a fundamental priority alongside international class struggle.

That still leaves us in the old situation of s-fs going to twice as many meetings. There's no solution to this, except trying to build stronger support, social & pleasurable ties between us. It's easy, isn't it???

Suddes.