

The Womens Movement today

By Margo Condoleon



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Preface

This pamphlet is based on a report adopted by the October meeting of the Socialist Workers Party National Committee. The report outlines recent developments in the women's liberation movement, and discusses their significance. It also explains the approach of the Socialist Workers Party to the women's liberation movement and our perspectives for future work.

The women's movement today

It's been quite some time since we've had a discussion at a National Committee meeting on the women's liberation movement and our work in it.

In fact, if we'd attempted to have a discussion two or three years ago there wouldn't have been a hell of a lot to say, mainly because there wasn't too much going on in the organised women's liberation movement.

That's just the way things were then and there was little we could do to change this situation.

Still, I think that despite the objective limitations, the record of the party throughout this last period, in terms of doing women's liberation work has been pretty good.

It's always been a question that we put up front when it comes to projecting the party and what we stand for. This is particularly the case with **Direct Action**, where no-one can fault the coverage we've had. We've educated not just our members, but much broader layers, on our program for women's liberation through our women's liberation book [**Women and Socialism**, Pathfinder Press, Sydney, 1984]. We've recruited to the party on the basis of this program.

We were involved in the Jobs for Women campaign in Wollongong from its inception and have continued to support it in whatever way we can. This campaign as we know has had an enormous political impact.

Over the years there have been numerous International Women's Day committees and demonstrations that we've helped to build. All in all, when we've seen new in-

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Initiatives develop that appear to be going somewhere; we've generally had some input. These include campaigns around childcare, abortion law reform, funding for women's services and so on.

Finally, in our trade union work, when we've had the openings and opportunities to push ahead on this question, we've done some very useful work.

So, overall, we shouldn't under-rate what we've done in the women's liberation movement over the last few years. If there had been masses of women marching in the streets then obviously we would have done more. But, in terms of addressing and campaigning around the most important needs and demands of women, no other left party has done more than we have.

At the same time, we've recognised throughout this period that the degree of organisation of women as women, fighting around their own demands, has had little relationship to the spread and acceptance of the ideas of the women's liberation movement.

Impact of feminist ideas

While the organised movement has been small, the number of women who, consciously or not, identify with feminist objectives continues to grow dramatically. How many women do you know who support the basic demands of the women's liberation movement, including the right to abortion? There aren't too many around who don't.

Compare this to the early days of the women's liberation movement when, despite the big mobilisations, or maybe due to them, the ruling class and its media mouthpieces were trying to marginalise the movement.

The press really did try to portray it as a small group of crazy bra-burners. Mothers would freak out when their daughters started reading feminist journals or going to abortion demonstrations. Now there's a good chance that your mother was won over years ago and maybe even marches in IWD demonstrations.

Often this support for the ideas of women's liberation isn't all that well thought through. The support isn't on a subjective level. I don't know how many interviews I've read with women in non-traditional areas or career positions and they've been asked: "Are you a women's liberber?" More often than not they'll answer no but quickly qualify it with: "I'm not a women's liberber, I just support equal opportunities for women." In my opinion that's a good definition of a "women's liberber."

The ideas of women's liberation continue to have a radicalising effect on young women. Over the last few years we've commented on many occasions on the number of young women as opposed to young men that join Resistance. I think the reason for this is the radicalisation that continues to go on around fighting women's oppression.

There's no question that the issues and concerns of the women's liberation movement have deeply penetrated Australian society. One of the clearest indications of this is the response this has generated in the Labor Party and the trade unions. In particular, the Labor government is working overtime to project itself as the government responsive to the needs and demands of women. Not only has the ALP discovered that women candidates win votes, but since it came to office we have seen the establishment of numerous advisory councils and equal opportunity centres, not to mention proclamation after proclamation on women and employment, women and education and so on. The culmination of course was the anti-discrimination legislation.

It's clear that Labor is trying desperately to harness the feminist consciousness that exists. They are attempting to co-opt the movement and buy it off with limited reforms. In the trade union movement the left-wing bureaucrats in particular are trying to sound responsive to the needs of their women members.

Yet, at precisely this point in time, we are seeing some of the most significant developments for years in the women's liberation movement. While Labor is saying all

you have to do is support us, the discussion, debate and organisation in the women's movement is the healthiest it's been for some time.

For instance, many women's groups like the Women's Abortion Action Campaign in Sydney has been reactivated. **Right to Choose** is being published again and they plan to hold a national women's health conference next year. We've seen the emergence and growth of the women's peace movement, and I'll expand on these points later.

In March, 500 women attended the Socialist Feminist Conference and there is the ongoing organisation of this group. There was the size of the Women and Labour Conference in Brisbane in July, and, more importantly, the discussions held there. On campus the women's groups, at least in Sydney, appear to be stronger, more active, and more influential than I've seen for some time. In various states socialists have been able to intervene quite effectively in the Labor Women's organisations, pushing these groups to the left.

These developments, which are a result of the objective situation confronting women, are indications that the women's movement is not throwing in its lot with Labor. It's not 1972 all over again; there are not tremendous illusions in what Labor will do for women.

Labor's record

But, before I take up this point, I want to look at what Labor has done, or promised to do, for women. It's here that the Labor leaders face a real dilemma. They know the sentiment exists, they know that women want to make real gains and they want to tap this feminist consciousness. What they can't do in this period is offer women any meaningful reforms. To do this would run counter to both the economic and political framework they are operating in.

In the ALP's 1983 election campaign, the two women's issues that they really campaigned around were jobs for women and the whole question of equal opportunity, or,

more specifically, the anti-discrimination legislation.

While the Sex Discrimination Bill that went through parliament did include some real gains for women, its strongest section, dealing with affirmative action, was deferred for at least two years.

Any feminist who believed that the Labor government was really going to fight for women's rights would have had their illusions seriously shaken by this.

The affirmative action legislation would have required foreign, financial and trading corporations, as well as companies seeking government contracts, to include in their management plans a strategy to eliminate discrimination against women in all sections of the company. It would have applied to companies and corporations employing more than 100 people, or with a government contract or agreement for services and supplies exceeding \$50,000.

In effect, it would have represented the kind of legislation necessary to guarantee women real employment opportunities by opening up the job market and allowing them access to traditionally male areas of work. It's little wonder that it was precisely this that the Labor government decided to defer.

And why did the Labor government stall on this question? Basically because the bosses complained like mad that the whole thing would cost them money. After all, they would have had to fork out money to install some women's toilets and so on. So, the excuse given was that there was a lack of community understanding about how affirmative action would operate.

So, instead they initiated some affirmative action test cases. Particular employers, in particular locations, became test cases. For instance, BHP at Whyalla is an affirmative action test case. Meanwhile, the Wollongong women take them to court demanding job justice. Examples like this show what a sham the whole thing is without real legislation. But apart from the limited gains contained in the Sex Discrimination Bill, Labor has done little else for women. While the budget contained some

small concessions as far as funding in some areas was concerned, it did little to address the most urgent needs of women.

Unemployment

For example, the unemployment rate for women is around 9.5 per cent. For young women it is a staggering 20 per cent. Significantly, 80 per cent of the estimated 70-0,000 people who make up the "hidden" unemployed are women. If this estimation were included, the real unemployment rate for women would be over 20 per cent.

The Labor government is not only incapable of addressing this problem, it didn't even pretend to do so in the last budget. Money spent on job creation was cut by over \$22 million. While the government tries to project the Community Employment Program as the answer to women's unemployment, the whole scheme is becoming increasingly discredited.

It's held by most to be a cynical means of artificially lowering the unemployment figures by funding short-term work. And, while the government boasts that CEP offers equal opportunities for women, this is not the case. Women's participation rate in it is around 30 per cent.

But if the Labor government is doing little for women, their counterparts in the trade union movement are doing less. That's not to say that nothing is going on in the trade union movement. There actually are some very interesting developments, but these generally fall into two categories.

Either, they fall into the category of what's acceptable to the government and the confines of their prices and incomes policy and the Accord, like the affirmative action test cases. Or, they have developed independently of the trade union bureaucrats, like the shorter-hours struggle by the NSW nurses and the Jobs for Women campaign.

But the trade union bureaucracy, particularly the fake left, are facing the same dilemma as the Labor government. Demands for women's rights on the job are gaining a stronger and stronger hold amongst working women.

This has been encouraged by the growth of working women's centres, migrant resource centres, workers' health centres, trade union women's committees and so on. The union officials have to appear to support these bodies because they do help workers. This in turn deepens the contradictions they face. These centres raise the consciousness of workers. They, in turn, start placing demands on the union officials who just aren't prepared to fight.

This is not to say that the union leadership won't turn on these centres and committees if they feel they have to, if things are getting too uncomfortable for them. The attacks on the Working Women's Centre in Melbourne shows that they will.

Affirmative action test cases

The affirmative action test cases work in the same way, that is, they deepen the dilemma. While some of them have been a farce — the establishment of token women's committees over the heads of the women workers — others are much more interesting.

The two that have received some attention in the press are the Government Ammunitions factory and the Government Clothing factory in Melbourne. We know most about the ammo factory because we have members working there. They report that this affirmative action test case has led to some really positive gains for the workers there.

I gather that the main reason for this is that both these factories come under the tutelage of Brian Howe, the Minister for Defence Support and prominent leader of the Victorian Socialist Left. He apparently is quite fired up about affirmative action.

According to our members at the ammo factory the whole experience has had a tremendous impact, not just on the women workers, but on the whole workforce. Howe came to the factory and launched the campaign. Women from the Western Region Centre for Working Women were allowed almost unlimited access to the factory.

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According to our members at the ammo factory the whole experience has had a tremendous impact, not just on the women workers, but on the whole workforce. Howe came to the factory and launched the campaign. Women from the Western Region Centre for Working Women were allowed almost unlimited access to the factory.

They held meetings with the women workers who were really encouraged to raise and discuss all the issues that they thought were important. According to the reports I've heard it was like opening Pandora's box. Everything came out, childcare, health and safety, repetition injuries, the lack of advancement opportunities for women workers, general working conditions and so on.

The women really loved it. They referred to it as the "women's lib" project and the male workers came right behind it. On the other hand, management was really hostile to the whole thing. From what I gather, it culminated in a long report which outlined all the women's grievances and made certain recommendations. These included setting up a factory women's committee and holding regular mass meetings of women workers to make sure that conditions were improved.

The Sydney Morning Herald on October 5 carried an article on the report. It said: "Women working in two defence support department factories in Victoria are enduring nineteenth century working conditions including work hazards, stress associated with piece work and victimisation by foremen.

"The report painted a picture of a group of largely powerless women workers, subject to the pressures of production, conveyed from management through often dictatorial foremen, suffering appalling working conditions and associated health problems without adequate recourse." You can see now why management and many of the foremen didn't like the project. Still, it makes you wonder why you have to be an affirmative action test case before anyone discovers the rotten conditions you're forced to work in, or listens to your grievances.

The position that we occupy on the shop committee at the ammo factory means that there at least this report won't be forgotten; action will be taken to improve the lot of the women workers. But I don't think we can be so confident about other places. Management will try and brush the whole affair under the carpet and we shouldn't as-

sume that the Labor government will do anything meaningful unless it's forced to do so from the shop floor.

Still, the ammo factory experience shows us that where the affirmative action program is being concretely applied it's having a tremendous impact on the consciousness and expectations of workers, both male and female. It makes you wonder what the response will be if and when Labor doesn't deliver the goods.

But, apart from examples like this, we're finding that where working women are struggling, where action is going on; it's not due to the initiatives of the trade union bureaucrats.

I don't know how closely comrades are following the developments in the Jobs for Women campaign but there have been some big steps forward recently. The victory around legal aid was a very important development. Leading up to this there was good press coverage and the campaign to win legal aid got the backing even of NSW Premier Neville Wran.

Trade union bureaucracy

But, getting back to the role of the union officialdom, what we're finding is that they're trying to kill any initiatives to improve the lot of women workers. The fake lefts are making a few noises about certain issues but they're also locked into the Accord, which basically allows for no real gains.

A good example of this is the equal pay campaign that's been discussed in both the trade union and women's liberation movements. In Melbourne, the Council for Equal Pay has been formed which had a big launching last August. A campaign around equal pay has the potential to be quite an explosive one in the Australian trade union movement. This is because of the enormous inequality that exists.

These figures on wage levels really say it all. In 1983, for the 28.2 per cent of women who work full time, their earnings were 76 cents for every dollar earned by male workers.

The reason for this, of course, lies with the occupational segregation that exists. In fact, a 1977 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development study of 12 countries showed that Australia had the highest level of industrial segregation. In February 1984, 64 per cent of women workers were concentrated in only three occupations — clerical, sales and services.

One of the major factors hampering women's attempts to gain equal pay is the fact that the work areas in which so many women are concentrated are extremely undervalued. This has been reinforced by the Accord and subsequent National Wage Case decisions which prohibit work value cases for existing occupations. Work value cases are only allowed where new technology has opened up new areas of employment.

Women and the Accord

So, the Accord actually reinforces occupational segregation. For us, then it's clear: The only way to mount a meaningful campaign for equal pay lies with challenging the Accord and the National Wage Case guidelines. But not so for the trade union bureaucrats. The best that even the "left" can come up with on this question is waiting till September next year and then putting in a submission to renegotiate the National Wage Case guidelines so that comparative-worth tests are allowed to take place.

In other areas, too, these same trade union leaders are standing by and allowing the position of women in the workforce to be increasingly eroded. As far as jobs go, it's the traditionally-female occupations that are really feeling the impact of new technology. From process workers in the manufacturing industry to telephonists, typists and shop assistants, many thousands of jobs are on the line. The Accord's ban on shorter-hours agreements ensures that new technology will only benefit the bosses and many thousands of women will end up back in the home.

If there ever was a time to fight for women's rights on

the job it's now. Equal pay, affirmative action, shorter hours, not to mention higher wages, are all vital concerns for working women.

Yet, we'd be kidding ourselves to think that we're likely to see any of the current trade union officialdom boldly leading struggles around any of these issues. Rather, they'll continue to pay lip-service to the consciousness that exists while attempting to redirect or knife any struggle that threatens to go beyond the confines of the Accord.

Given this situation is it any wonder that there's no real enthusiasm for Labor or its economic policies among, in particular, the current activists in the women's movement?

Sure, there are feminists in the Labor Party who have recently found themselves occupying seats in parliament, doing a brave job trying to convince themselves and other women in the party that now is not a good time to move abortion motions or fight for affirmative action. But this is only half the story. The other half is the discussions, debates and policies adopted by Labor Women's conferences, which are a little more in touch with the thoughts of rank-and-file ALP women.

The NSW Labor Women's Conference, held on September 29-30, consistently adopted left-wing policies. This included endorsement of the Social Rights Campaign which, as most people are aware, stands in firm opposition to the Accord. At the National Labor Women's Conference, held earlier this year, Hawke was booed by the delegates there.

Examples like this show us that nothing is cut and dry in the women's movement. What weakens Labor's attempts to divert the movement is the general level of consciousness that exists and the fact that they are offering women nothing more than a few crumbs.

The developments that have occurred in the movement, which I went through earlier, deserve our consideration and attention. While it's very uneven and rather undeveloped at this stage, we are seeing more ac-

tivity, new organisations, and a real political discussion in the movement. These developments suggest that rather than fall into the general scheme of things, the women's liberation movement could move forward in this period.

I now want to briefly go through some of the most important developments.

Women's peace groups

First of all, there has been the development of the women's peace groups including Women for Survival, Women's Action Against Global Violence, Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament, and so on. These groups exist now in all capital cities plus Newcastle and Wollongong. There may well be others that I don't know about. Currently the focus of their activities is the women's peace camp to be held at Cockburn Sound in December.

Whilst politically they may be quite different, the general thrust behind these groups is feminists organising in their own groups around the vital question of peace. There's no doubt that formed on this basis these are progressive organisations which can and do significantly strengthen the peace movement overall.

In many cities, in particular Newcastle, Wollongong and Perth, we are, or have been, centrally involved in these groups. We have found that the other activists are very good, in fact they are people who should be in our party. At different times these women have been our strongest political allies when it comes to pushing anti-imperialist demands in the broader peace movement.

In the groups in the cities I have mentioned we have been able to be part of very open political discussions. We've found that the women are interested in discussing socialism and the Marxist view of, not only women's oppression, but, what causes war. By and large, the conclusion we have drawn in each of these cities is that these groups are large, active, outgoing organisations that we will continue to work in.

This doesn't mean that a whole range of opinions don't exist in these groups and in the movement as a whole; they most certainly do. But this is characteristic of not just the women's movement but any broad coalition.

In Sydney and Melbourne we have been less consistently involved, mainly because the political character of these groups has been less open. Still, from what I know, we've come behind big events in whatever way we could and intervened at various points, which we should continue to do.

The other thing I want to raise relating to this point is just what our position on eco-feminism should be. This is a question that is being discussed and debated out in the women's peace movement.

Eco-feminism

The whole concept of eco-feminism has been interpreted in many ways. For some women involved in the peace movement, eco-feminism means feminists organising their own peace groups. As I said earlier in this report, we think this is a very progressive thing. But eco-feminism is more than this.

It's essentially a political philosophy in the same way radical feminism is. It attempts to pinpoint the causes of war and outline solutions based on these causes. Its premises on the causes of war are wrong and lead to some very reactionary positions. Very crudely eco-feminism says: Men are inherently aggressive and inherently destructive. Women aren't because women are mothers and nurturers and, therefore, much closer to nature. This lets women off the hook on two counts.

Firstly, because they're supposedly close to nature, women don't destroy it, and, secondly, because women supposedly aren't aggressive they don't cause wars. Men on the other hand are responsible for the oppression of both women and nature and this in turn reinforces the "common bond" that women and nature are supposed to share.

Therefore, eco-feminism concludes, the peace issue is a

purely feminist one because the struggle for peace boils down to fighting the patriarchy.

Needless to say, identification with the philosophy of eco-feminism hasn't really taken off in a big way in Australia. I think there are two main reasons for this. Firstly, so many of the feminists now active in the peace movement have fought long and hard against the idea that a woman's natural role is as mother and nurturer, and, secondly, it's just so obvious that men, as a sex, have nothing to gain from a nuclear war. Moreover, a large percentage of the peace activists in this country are men.

Still, the debate goes on and from time to time we've had to steer some of the committees away from eco-feminist-type positions. For instance, in the Perth WAND group we've always argued that it's wrong to push the anti-sailor issue. In our opinion this is reactionary. The focus of the movement there has to remain around the real issue — no visits by US warships!

We should understand where the peace question is taking the women's movement. In doing this we should remember that the identification of feminists with the peace movement is a lot broader than those women organised in Women for Survival groups.

For example, it's featured prominently in just about every feminist paper or journal that I've seen recently. Tons of books have been written by feminists about it and at the Women and Labour Conference there were numerous sessions on it. The peace issue has become a central one in the women's movement.

So, where does this take the movement politically. I'd say that just about the last place it can go is into the arms of the Labor Party. No feminist, anti-war activist in their right mind would, at this point in time, be considering joining the Labor Party. Labor's betrayal of every progressive anti-nuclear, anti-war policy it had is driving a little deeper the wedge between it and the women's movement. The fact that the ALP had an anti-uranium policy but this was simply ignored by the Labor government, and, subsequently ditched at the ALP National

Conference, has shown most feminist peace activists that trying to reform ALP policies by working inside it is a dead end.

International developments

It's interesting to look at the developments internationally in this regard. We've spent a lot of time this weekend, and during our preparations for the election campaign, discussing the German Green Party. I'd like to throw another element into this discussion. The opening paragraph to the German Green's program states:

"We are the alternative to the traditional parties. We grew out of a coalition of alternative groups and parties. We feel solidarity with all those who have become active in the new democratic movement: the life and nature groups, the environmental protection groups, the citizens initiative organisations, the movements for peace, human rights, women's rights and Third World rights."

So, they very much pose it as the coming together of different progressive movements around a common program.

If you read a little further you get to the Green's program on women which is really very good. It contains statements like:

"In the Green Party women are more actively involved as co-partners in the determination of political objectives than in other parties. This trend will increase even more to the extent that women are prepared to assume more political responsibility and are no longer denied positions of responsibility and authority."

From what I know about the German Greens, the composition of the party as a whole and its leadership, it is a real pole of attraction for feminists. They helped form it, they continue to join it, and they are strong in its leadership.

In Australia, I think we can see similar elements in organisations like the Nuclear Disarmament Party here in Sydney. It's struck me time and time again that not

only are there a hell of a lot of women in the NDP but more often than not, when someone is speaking on behalf of the NDP, that person is a woman.

It's quite similar with the Sydney Greens. There are a lot of women, a lot of feminists, involved, who play a very influential role in the formation as a whole.

This is reflected in their draft program, which is still in the process of being debated, amended and refined. Still, the question of women's liberation is right up front and everybody agrees that it should be given that priority. Their draft program states:

"We stand for the need of people to control their own lives. Social freedom and equality cannot be conceived without an end to all forms of discrimination and oppression."

Further on it says:

"For women this means the right to reproductive freedom and an unrestricted right to economic independence, as part of a process of breaking down hierarchical structures and beginning to reorder values by eliminating the divisions between the public and private domains."

Of course it would be a mistake to read too much into this. We don't know where the NDP or the Sydney Greens will go after this election. But, the point we can make out of this is, with the women's movement taking up the peace issue in the way that it is, its political trajectory is away from the Labor Party and much more towards independent organisation and mobilisation, with many of the activists being drawn towards these new left-wing formations.

A broadening outlook

There is another aspect to this that I want to touch on briefly which I think is also part of the women's movement broadening its concerns and outlook. This has to do with what I think is a new emphasis on the whole question of solidarity with women in the Third World. Again, this theme runs through many feminist papers and journals.

Some of the articles I've seen recently take up the exploitation of women in the Philippines. One very good article by a Filipino woman, basically explained why the fate of women in the Philippines, was intrinsically tied to the development of the revolution there.

There have been articles on the advances the Nicaraguan revolution has made for women, articles on Africa, the Pacific and so on. For instance, the latest **Scarlet Woman** advertises the meetings of, not only the Philippines Action Support Group, but a new organisation as well called Women in Solidarity with Women in the Philippines.

At the Women and Labour Conference two of the best-attended sessions were the ones addressed by representatives of the African National Congress and the Federation of Cuban Women.

This growing identification and solidarity with women's struggles in the Third World is something we have to promote. Once you become aware of the situation facing women in the Third World it's easy to see the link between the oppression they face and the role that imperialism plays in those countries. Increasing numbers of feminists in Australia are not only seeing the link but getting enthusiastic about the advance of the national liberation revolutions. Our solidarity work has got to be able to reach out to these women and get them involved.

Socialist-feminist group

The next thing I want to look at is the socialist-feminist group in Melbourne. The Socialist Feminist Conference in March, which was only a Melbourne conference, had over 500 women attending, which is very significant. Since then the main activity has been to set up a socialist-feminist organisation. Meetings have been held monthly, attended on average by about 50 women, with up to 100 involved in the project.

The composition of the group is interesting. Apart from two to three members of the CPA, we're the only other left party involved. Most of the other women, especially

the key ones, are long-time women's movement activists, many of whom have gone through an interesting political evolution.

Many of them in the past have been exceptionally hostile to the ideas of socialism. In some cases they were prominent radical feminists.

This is characteristic of a whole core of women involved. They've come from being hard-line separatists to, from all accounts, serious socialist-feminists. This evolution in their thinking is very much tied to the experiences that the women's movement has gone through in the last 15 years.

They've done the separatist bit; they've put all their energies into women's services; they've experienced the reforms of Labor governments; and now they've come to the conclusion that you have to fight the system. I think that the size of the Socialist Feminist Conference is an indication that many other long-time activists in the movement have drawn similar conclusions.

We should regard this as a very positive development. Sure, we may not agree with everyone on every point, and there is a certain suspicion of left-wing parties, but it is an important step forward nevertheless.

According to the reports I've heard, within the on-going planning group there is a very good atmosphere, with very broad, open political discussions, a willingness to listen, and an appreciation of the contribution SWP members can make in clarifying political questions.

One of the things that the group is grappling with now is what to do next; how to take things further politically in the women's liberation movement.

I just want to read some excerpts from an article in *Scarlet Woman* written by one of the activists in the socialist-feminist group, Sue Jackson. It's a report on the conference and it gives us an idea on the nature of the organisation, its strengths and weaknesses.

"The 1984 conference saw less of the euphoria and raw anger, and certainly less of the fiery optimism of its forerunner [that is, the 1974 Feminism and Socialism

Conference]. There was also less dogged sectarianism (with the notable exception of the Spartacist League,) and a virtual absence of the suspicious caution aroused by any mention of socialism at the 1974 conference.

"These features have been largely replaced by a search for a real focus and direction in our struggles, a new seriousness and a renewed sense of determination. There was evidence of a more realistic, if less exciting approach, which was reflected in the title of the conference — Down to Business. This new approach was characterised by a great appreciation of the long haul, a legacy perhaps of the continuing recession and the general shift to the right in Australian politics."

Further on, the article continues:

"Discussion on the second day, around the theme women and the labor movement centered on the implications of the Prices and Incomes Accord for women, and on strategies for socialist feminists under Labor governments. Several speakers called for a mass influx of women into the ALP as a strategy for pressing our demands. This was greeted with considerable skepticism and appears even more problematic following the ALP national conference."

The article concludes:

"For me a number of things became clear during the course of the conference. First, there is no such thing as 'women's issues.' All issues are of importance to women and we need to develop our knowledge and strategies in those areas not previously considered women's issues.

"Second, whilst many issues have remained on our agenda for the past ten years we are not fighting the same battles over and over again. We have succeeded in moving these on to a different level. The issue of equal pay is a good example. Whilst the arbitration commission decision in 1972 has done little to ensure that women receive an equitable share of the wealth of the country, it has now meant that we are able to point to the underlying reasons for unequal pay. This of course involves the whole complex web of women's oppression. We can now

demonstrate that unequal pay is not merely a lingering effect of outdated prejudices to be remedied by legal reform. Rather it is fundamental to the system in which we live and to the inequitable distribution of wealth which it supports. The only solution is fundamental change in that system, beginning with real redistribution of wealth and income "

I'd recommend comrades read this article for themselves because there are other interesting points in it. There's not a hell of a lot in it on what to do next, the next practical steps, which shows a certain confusion on this level. It's a lot clearer on what not to do, the traps of the past, the pitfalls to be avoided in the future. In many ways though, this sort of discussion is needed in the women's movement — if enough cobwebs are cleared away it will be easier to see where to go next.

Women and Labour conference

Finally, I want to take up the Women and Labour Conference which was held in Brisbane in July. I think that all of our members who attended, and there were 14 or 15 of us, came away very excited by the discussion and enthusiasm it generated.

For a start, it was very big — over 1700 women attended. Women and labour conferences really have become an important focus for the women's liberation movement; they are, in effect, the biennial conference of the movement. But it wasn't just the size, it was the discussions and the direction that you could see the women's movement going in that I think excited us the most. Our intervention was very good, we sold 200 copies of **Direct Action**, and so on.

It's hard to give a feel for what the conference was like. In the past I've really dreaded women's conferences. They were something that you sold **Direct Action** outside of and from that point on you were tainted. The rest of the weekend it was like you were walking around with a brand on your forehead that read "I am a member of a male-dominated political party" or "I collaborate with

the enemy." At this conference there was not even a sniff of this. In fact, most of the women I talked to considered themselves socialists of one shade or another.

This was reflected in the way we were able to intervene, and, more particularly, in the responsiveness to our ideas. While so many women there considered themselves socialists there was, at times, confusion on the theoretical level that we were able to provide some clarity on.

This also came through in the workshop put on by the International Socialists entitled "Reform or Revolution." When I walked in there were over 50 women at that session and I thought it was a bit of a coup for the IS. But then Carole Ferrier started giving their line.

She explained that feminism is basically petty-bourgeois reformism and quite counterposed to Marxism. There was quite an interesting response to this. Throughout her talk the audience was getting more and more agitated and as soon as she finished speaking a multitude of hands shot up. Everyone was hostile to the IS position but Carole Ferrier was parading it as the genuine Marxist position on women's oppression. In this situation our contributions to the discussion, explaining that there wasn't an ounce of Marxism in the position they were putting forward, went down really well.

Other interesting responses came from the workshops on the economy. In particular, ours on "Women and the Accord" had a big turn up and no one there, not even the women from the Communist Party, had a good thing to say about the Accord.

But the most important thing about this conference was the broad layers of women that attended and the discussions that were generated.

Composition of the movement

By and large, up until now the women's movement has been composed largely of campus women, women from middle-class backgrounds, or women employed in white-collar jobs. I'm not saying that this is a bad thing neces-

sarily, it's just a statement of fact. Women from these backgrounds developed higher expectations and could more clearly see the gap between what women were certainly capable of achieving and the actual role that society determined they should play. This glaring injustice spurred these women into political action.

That's not to say that the movement was middle class; just the opposite is true. It has consistently raised demands that go to the very heart of women's oppression, that challenge the very foundations of the capitalist system.

Our book, **Women and Socialism**, explains it this way:

"All women are oppressed as women. Struggles around specific aspects of women's oppression necessarily involve women from different classes and social layers. Even some bourgeois women, revolting against their oppression as women, can break with their class and be won to the side of the revolutionary workers movement as the road to liberation.

"As Lenin pointed out in his discussions with Clara Zetkin, action around aspects of women's oppression has the potential to reach into the heart of the enemy class, to 'foment and increase unrest, uncertainty and contradictions and conflicts in the camp of the bourgeoisie and its reformist friends . . . Every weakening of the enemy is tantamount to a strengthening of our forces.'

"Even more important from the point of view of the revolutionary Marxist party is the fact that resentment against their oppression as women can often be the starting point in the radicalisation of decisive layers of petty bourgeois women whose support the working class must win."

But at times we've noted that the middle-class composition of the movement has sometimes been reflected in an overemphasis on more peripheral aspects of women's oppression. It's always been our position that the movement must become firmly based among working-class women.

Our book puts it this way:

"While all women are affected by their oppression as women the mass women's liberation movement we strive to build must be basically working class in composition, orientation and leadership. Only such a movement, with roots in the most exploited layers of working-class women, will be able to carry the struggle for women's liberation through to the end in an uncompromising way, allying itself with the social forces whose class interests parallel and intersect those of women. Only such a movement will be able to play a progressive role under conditions of sharpening class polarisation."

Well I think this Women and Labour Conference represented some significant steps forward in this regard. Because the theme of the conference was racism there were more Aboriginal and migrant women, representing a number of different organisations, than I've ever seen before at a women's liberation conference. This led to some great discussions.

Because the whole conference was a series of different workshops, with up to 15 running concurrently, the women from these organisations felt that they were being marginalised by the conference. They felt that no one was attending their workshops except the converted. They wanted the opportunity to have a broad discussion on what the priorities of the women's liberation movement should be. Obviously they wanted to argue their own point of view on this question.

This led to some big plenary sessions being held where primarily the Aboriginal and migrant women argued that the movement had to put more emphasis on the question of women's economic oppression. They were arguing that the movement had to systematically take up the demands that were essential for migrant and Aboriginal women to win as a first step towards their liberation as women.

The migrant women's organisations were stressing the need to fight for the rights of working women, the question of English classes and so on. Aboriginal women were arguing that land rights was obviously a central question for them, along with health, education and so on. On the

whole, I think that the reaction from the other women there was good. Generally people agreed that these were questions that the women's movement had to put up front because they were absolute preconditions for the liberation of women.

It appears that this is not just a one-off thing either. For instance, in Adelaide the idea is floating around that a women's liberation conference be held there next year and the Aboriginal women there are keen to see it happen.

It's very hard to sum up and tie together all these developments because it's very diffuse, uneven and only in the initial stages of development. I don't want to make any grand predictions of what's going to happen because, on that level, nothing is clear. On the one hand there is a certain weakness — the one question that everyone is asking but no one answering is: Where does the women's movement go from here?

It's a difficult question to answer because it's not something that you can suck out of your thumb. It's affected by the general political situation, the right-wing policies of the Labor government, the grip of the labor bureaucracy and its effectiveness in stifling working-class militancy.

Strengths of the movement

We can really only look at the developments that have or are occurring and here see the strengths of the movement. These are: The level of consciousness that exists; the issues that are being taken up; the growth of new feminist organisations; the mobilisations that have occurred; the political evolution of many of the veterans of the women's liberation movement and the reorganisation of this milieu; the receptiveness to socialist ideas that appears to exist and so on.

We can bring all these elements together to give us an overall picture of the situation. Despite the Labor government, despite on the one hand its platitudes to women, on the other its general demobilising effect, the women's

movement is more active and more organised than we've seen for some time.

Our tasks

So where does this leave us? What are our tasks as a result of this? Again, there are no definitive proposals on this. It depends very much on what's going on, if anything, in a particular city, what our resources are and so on.

But there are a few general points I want to make. Given the consciousness that exists on this question, all party members need to have a good grounding on our program for women's liberation. It's probably happened to all of us at some time or another — when you least expect it, whether it's at a union meeting, on the job, at a mass-movement meeting, or on campus, all of a sudden you have to get up and explain some aspect of women's liberation.

This is going to increasingly be the case, particularly on the job. The other side to the whole affirmative-action question is the line that some trade union leaders are pushing, which is that affirmative action is a bad thing; it splits the working class, men and women should be treated as equals, women shouldn't be given preferential treatment, and other general rubbish in the same vein. We have to be able to counter all these arguments and convince workers that affirmative action for women is a good thing and that it can be used to benefit all workers.

We can use our women's liberation book for this purpose. All our members should be encouraged to buy, read and study it.

We also need to push it around the movement more. We are the only left party with a program like this and, given the discussions that are going on, it's a very useful educational tool to use. It's a very good exposition of the Marxist view of women's liberation and should provoke some useful discussions.

Finally, there are two aspects to our involvement in the women's movement that I want to take up. When the



party first made the decision to significantly strengthen its implantation in the industrial unions we could have said: We are now going to junk all committee work. From now on all our women's liberation work will be carried out within the framework of the industrial unions. This is our arena; we want to build a working-class women's liberation movement, and so it's the unions, on the job or nothing.

We might have come close to such a position but we didn't go all the way. I think there are essentially two reasons for this. First, we knew that the committees that existed weren't just composed of middle-class women and certainly didn't have middle-class programs. Second, we understood the nature of women's oppression. We knew it cut across class lines. We understood the role it can play in winning middle class, and even bourgeois women to a working-class perspective, and we understood how important that was to our overall goal.

So we did both things. On the one hand, we continued to work in the committees that we felt were important; on the other, we campaigned to win workers to the ideas of women's liberation. We did this through the unions, on the shop floor, and more significantly through our support for the Jobs for Women campaign.

Obviously we're not proposing to change this basic orientation at all so I only want to make a few concrete proposals.

First of all, I'd like to comment on the Jobs for Women campaign. As the court case continues, solidarity and support work is becoming more and more critical. Needless to say, BHP wants to win this one. We need to bring as much pressure to bear as we can by stepping up our solidarity work in whatever way we can. We need to get the word around as much as possible — we need motions and letters of support from unions, women's groups, different committees, whatever. This is a central priority.

With our work on the job we need to take advantage of every opportunity that arises to move ahead on this ques-

tion. At some places we will have more opportunities than others. The ammunition factory in Melbourne is obviously a place where we can really push ahead. But, generally speaking, considering, on the one hand, the attacks on women workers and, on the other, the publicity that the affirmative action test cases are beginning to get, we can use them to heighten consciousness on this question.

Obviously, we want to continue working in the committees that we think are important politically and where people are moving in a progressive direction, like WAND and WAAGV. We should be thinking through how to draw these people closer to the party. It's really not such a big step to make if we pose it in the right way. The best way to do this, in my opinion, is by getting these women to identify joining the party with strengthening the struggle for women's liberation. After all, that is what we think. The struggle for women's liberation is intimately tied to the struggle for socialism, and, for that, you need a revolutionary socialist party.

Every branch needs to weigh up what sort of resources it can assign to this work. Depending on this, now might be a good time to check out this or that committee that we have been meaning to do for some time. We should point our women campus students in the direction of the local women's group, armed with some copies of **Women and Socialism**.

We should keep our eyes and ears open for any new developments that suggest that movement is going on, like this conference proposal in Adelaide. If it's useful, if it's going somewhere, then we should be a part of it in whatever way that is practically possible.

I really can't be any more concrete than this. In some branches we may be limited to just our propaganda work, what we say in **Direct Action**, the forums we have and so on. That's fine; we can't substitute ourselves for a movement that doesn't exist in any particular place.

But, where things are developing, where women are being drawn into political activity, where they're organis-

ing and reaching out to other women, we want to be part of these developments, help build them, and help win them to a Marxist perspective, to an understanding of the need to become members of the Socialist Workers Party.

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