

INTRODUCTION TO MEETING OF LIVERPOOL BIG FLAME WOMENS GROUP ON WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK. 25.2.76.

1. Wages for Housework and the Power of Women Collective.

Wages for Housework is the demand put forward by the Power of Women Collective. This is a women's group which started meeting within the Womens Liberation Movement about 3 years ago. There are now members in London, Reading, Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol and groups in Italy, Switzerland, Canada, North America, Australia (at least). They produce a good journal called 'Power of Women' and have written books and pamphlets which I've listed at the end.

The Power of Women is the clearest, strongest voice of womens autonomy in the womens movement. Womens Liberation has always included a wide range of political ideas. The Power of Women has done more than any other group to put forward a perspective which is feminist and anti-capitalist. They have put forward the need for a movement, for a theory and practice which expresses our autonomy from capital, from the reformism of trade union politics and organisation and from the male domination of class struggle in left groups.

Because of this women in Big Flame have always been politically close to the Power of Women. *We've been forced to have many discussions about Wages for Housework. The theory which they have developed has influenced ours. Our own practice, our own struggle has taught us to see things in very similar ways. We have to be clearer now on how we see this.

Do we agree on the demand 'Wages for Housework' or not? Or do we continue to say that our struggle for money, against work, in all kinds of different ways, is the way that the struggle of women is made - not with a catch-all demand? Do we think Wages for Housework as a demand confuses or unifies these struggles? And linked to this, let's be clear why we are Big Flame and how do we fight to build an autonomous womens movement?

(*For example, Selma James' 'Women the Unions and Work' summed up a perspective we shared, only more clearly.)

2. Capitalism - Work and Wages.

"As working class, the only condition under which we are allowed to exist is that we work. Everything else stems from this - every situation, every relationship, every crisis - everything about our existence. As the working class we work for capital, for its expansion and growth. In return we are allowed to survive."

"Although the wage is paid on condition that work is done, the form of work and the amount of work done have nothing to do with determining the wage. The wage is determined in the process of struggle between the working class and capital, a struggle centred around what the working class considers necessary as opposed to what capital considers necessary." (FOW November 1973.)

The big con is the idea that we get 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work'. We don't. Our wages are nowhere near the value of what we produce. Every day we work to create profits and ~~and in return we are~~ given 'enough to live on'. The boss wants us to be as little as possible for as much work as possible. The working class needs the exact opposite. That's why we have to fight and why we have to destroy capitalism. We need such a thing and we don't want the work.

Big Flame recognises that this is the 'anti-capitalist strategy of the working class' - the fight for communism as it goes on inside the daily struggle of the working class now. It's the fight to separate our needs from the needs of capitalist development; to separate our wages from the work we do for the bosses profits; to separate our right to live from the existence the bosses want to force on us as their working class.

This is our criticism of the demand for the Right to Work. We fight the loss of jobs as an attack on our wages and our organisation - never as a fight for work. And we fight for the right to wages, work or no work, because we need money to live on. (e.g we fight for guaranteed lay off pay, not for guaranteed work.)

We never demand the Right to Work for housewives either. We talk of the right to work less, the right not to work and the right to money - because we need money and we don't want a second job to get it. We know that housewives do too much work already - exhausting, boring, nerve racking work. And because we do that work we should get money without having to take on another load of work. Other left groups all oppose wages for housework and say women should get out to work - into 'social production' - as a liberation from the home. Over the decades many women have been driven into waged work by inflation, the need for an independent income, the need for some kind of variety in their lives. But this is no 'liberation'. Its deeper enslavement. Doing two (or more) jobs for one wage. The lowest paid, worst work at that - precisely because we are not paid at home and that work shapes the rubbish jobs we get out of the house. (The poorest of the working class - the old, the young, the handicapped, the unemployed housewives and immigrant workers - provide the cheapest labour. And because housework is for love, not money, we're supposed to work for peanuts in every other job and get a big kick out of doing everyone else a favour - like in hospitals. Or expected to do the same 'womens work' of cleaning, cooking, caring etc etc for next to nothing. After all we do it for nothing at all at home.)

Saying that women should get a wage only by going out to another job is like telling waged workers to go for a wage rise by demanding a productivity deal. And saying that housewives should be the only part of the working class not to get money to live on is ludicrous.

Let's go through some of the points. I haven't gone into everything because I think we should all read some of the POW stuff which fills in the details. But I'll go through some main things.

3. What is Housework.

All women do housework - whether we're single or married, with or without children. We do it for ourselves and for other people - for men who are boyfriends, husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, grandads; for children; for the people who cannot or will not do it for themselves. We give birth to and bring up the bosses future workers. We maintain the present generation of workers, including ourselves, so that the working class is fit enough to work another day. (That's why housework never ends.) We care for the workers who are thrown to one side - the sick, the old, the disabled.

Housework is the work of producing and reproducing labour power for the bosses. The problem is it doesn't seem like that. It's called a personal service that you do for love - your reward is being loved or feeling that you're 'a good woman'. When you do it you know its work - hard work. But it's so tied up with your feelings, with your identity, that you don't know where the work ends and you begin.

"By denying ~~women~~ ^{housework} a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone. First of all it has got a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life. (The magic words "Yes darling you are a real woman.") At the same time it has disciplined the male worker also by making his woman dependent on his work and his wage, and trapped him in the discipline by giving him a servant after he himself has served at the factory or office. In fact our role as women is to be the unwaged but happy, and ~~most~~ ^{of all} loving servants of the 'working class' ~~and those strata of the~~ proletariat to which capital was forced to grant more social power."

(Wages Against Housework.)

~~But~~ Housework is really nothing more nor less than work done to keep the working class going for the bosses. If you stuff chickens in the Birds Eye you could say you're working for the human race, making the food it needs to survive. But who, except Jesus Christ, would ever say that? Given the chance we'd all say the work stinks, the work relations stink, the food stinks, the only reason people do it is for the money and a bit of company out the house. And the only people who benefit are the bosses.

It's the same with housework. It's work that's defined and organised by the bosses in their own interests. On that work, on our shoulders, the capitalist world rests its big fat arse. But having no wage we're not supposed to see that. It isn't 'real work'. The real workers get money. The more beefy they are the more they get. That's the con they try to put over. That's despite the fact that when we do the same work outside the house we get paid - like cleaning or cooking. As long as that work is done at home for no wages at all we'll be told we're not real workers, we're the wives of the working class instead of the working class and we'll get paid ~~for~~ next to nothing in waged work as well.

And housework will continue to be seen as our natural identity - our personality. And that will continue to shape every part of our lives. How do you love a man or know if you love him or not when you depend on his money? When you have to argue for it, beg for it, fuck for it, iron shirts for it? How do you find any sense of independence or power when you're trapped by so much work for no money - when you can't afford the price of a bus fare or a women's pamphlet? How can you know what your sexual feelings are, what your emotional needs are when fucking is part of a bargain with a man on whose money you depend?

One thing people often say is that getting wages for housework won't change all the ideological/emotional/sexual problems of women. But none of this can change without economic independence and without housework being recognised as work, which has to be paid for with money instead of ^{with} the lives of millions of women.

4. Socialisation of housework.

The left groups all talk about the 'socialisation' of housework instead of wages for housework. Here, for example is what 'Workers Action', the latest Trotskyist paper says..

"Housework is soul destroying drudgery. In its present form it can all be done away with by the social provision of laundries, cheap or free workers restaurants, and child care. It is precisely because we wish to free women from the isolation and stultification of this kind of work in the confines of the individual home that we think the demand for wages for housework is self-defeating and reactionary. For if wages were paid

"We all agree on saying that the fight for money against work is the class struggle. But saying wages for housework reduces this struggle and confuses it." "Therefore, we agree on wages for housework as a perspective that is expressed in all sorts of different ways by the struggle of women. But not as a demand which is 'put on top of' all these struggles."

I've said this myself as well. For example, on Tower Hill we've fought for school buses, safety barriers, a womens centre, against rents, evictions, housing conditions. We've all said that these were struggles for money, against work. For more time, power for women. We've said yes, these are struggles for wages for housework. But we weren't sure that if we'd started off with the demand for wages for housework we would have fought these struggles, which had to be fought, and we weren't sure that putting 'wages for housework' onto them would have made anything clearer or got us nearer to where we want to go.

Now I'm not so sure. I think it has to be seen as a demand which shapes a perspective, a perspective which shapes a demand. (hmm). Firstly, its the only demand which deals with the need of housewives for money, for the work they do and for themselves, all in one go. Saying 'guaranteed adequate income for housewives' doesn't clarify the issues in the same way. It doesn't point out that women work, that housework should be paid for wherever it is done. Wages for housework is a feminist demand which offers more chance of unifying the struggles of all women and of being a general class focus, because it is about the work we do.

Flowing out of this is the perspective it gives to how we struggle. Take the Abortion Campaign. We know that our right to choose must mean the right to have children as well as the right not to have children. Otherwise we again give more power to the state who at all times regulates our bodies. Sometimes they want to give us abortions, sterilisation, contraception; sometimes they want us to have more children. At the moment more and more women ^{openly} support Abortion; the Right to Choose. Because we have more power; we now have a womens movement which has brought things out in the open etc. But I think also because more women are being forced again to think of having abortions through poverty and overwork, because of the crisis. We cannot afford to let the abortion campaign be controlled by men and women who will let it be used by the state in the interests of the bosses. It must be controlled by a feminist, anti-capitalist perspective which demands a real right to choose.

We agree. But what does that mean? It means more money. What does that mean? It means socialisation of housework on our terms, it means having money enough of our own, it means having it without having to take on more work. The only demand that sums all that up is wages for housework.

Or take any struggle. Equal Pay with no strings - our right to money and our right to refuse more work and our right to much more than Equal pay because we do at least two jobs. Community controlled, state-paid nurseries. The right of hospital workers to refuse to labour for love, to refuse to care for patients as long as that means working for peanuts in return for a mountain of work. All these are struggles for wages for housework. And saying they are means we can draw them together, and link them to that struggle which is now less clear - the struggle of the housewife for money, for her work and for herself. Only wages for housework really sums it up and draws our struggles today together in a long term perspective, and in a way which speaks for all women.

Let's face it. What is the single, most important thing that has enabled us in Big Flame to understand all the different ~~xxx~~ struggles of women in a more overall way? What has led us to see all our struggles as for more money, less work? Wages for Housework and the POW.

