

LETTER TO THE EDITORIAL COLLECTIVES OF WOMENS STRUGGLE NOTES.

Introduction: last January I offered to write "something on lesbianism" for the 2nd issue of Womens Struggle Notes. For ages I puzzled what to write - didn't want a heavy impersonal piece and at same time didn't think my own life-story (full of boarding school, university, militant politics, freak, collective childcare, nearly 30 never been married or borne a child) would seem relevant to the women reading W.S. Notes - would in fact more likely reinforce the image of lesbian-as-freak, something that Other Women are. So me and a friend who is compiling a Directory on Women interviewed Claudette, a West Indian lesbian friend with 2 daughters who used to live next door to me with her husband. Through getting to know our household and meeting gay women she began to realise her lesbian potential; eventually she and her husband split up and she moved into a council flat nearby with another woman (friend, not lover) who had a kid the same age, and began to study for 3 "O" Levels at college evening class. She seemed a good choice for W.S. Notes in that:

+she is an ordinary woman whose life has greatly improved by action she has taken, with the support of others - this is no gloomy story of misery and despair. A theme of W.S. Notes is supposed to be how women have acted to improve their lives.

+she is no different from many other black women in education, circumstances etc. - she is surrounded by relatives in this area, people who make it hard to change - not a displaced middle-class leftie to whom people can say "Oh it's easy for you" (it's not in fact but that's another story) to come out, proclaim your difference,

+she talks in an easy-to-read, personal way which yet brings out a lot of issues which spread wider than lesbianism - things about how much better off she is, financially, since her husband left; how she has more control over and choices in her life now, while still emphasizing the difficulties of being a single parent. Many women, we felt, could identify with this.

((Every BF women's group should have one or more copies of this interview so if you want to see it, contact them; if no luck, write to me)).

The editorial collective for the 2nd W.S. Notes didn't like the interview, thought it too personal not political enough, should be more analytical. After this I asked a lot of women in B.F. their opinion though in a rather disorganised way - some thought it great some said nothing - time passed - and eventually I heard from the editorial collective for the 3rd W.S. Notes. They turned it down again as being too "confusing", too "heavy", that it puts down sleeping with men as being "empty, pointless, always leads to acting like a slave" (it doesn't say this in fact), also this together with Claudette's opinion that all women should try sleeping with women they found "quite threatening". It's a question, they say, of "how we project the idea of transforming our relationships, be they men-women; women-women; men-men; sexual, personal and social". They go on about the need to build up W.S. Notes among women who have barely begun to think about Womens Liberation and what it entails. This means being careful about what we write, and treating the experiences of the women we know will read it sympathetically" ((so none of the readers are potentially attracted to women - Claudette is an isolated freak?)).

Gloom. I then received a request to write something for the BF Womens Conf. Report on - guess what - lesbianism and sexuality. After much thought and delay I replied with the following letter:

Dear Sisters,

I'm afraid I haven't written anything on Lesbianism and Sexuality for the BF Womens Conference Report. There are several reasons I suppose. Firstly I feel very unconfident about writing things for BF,

which is strange as I do a lot of writing otherwise and it is something I am fairly confident about. Perhaps it's because I feel that what I write should be highly theoretical and flawless, and I don't feel that intellectual. Partly because of the uncomradely and also unisisterly way I fear what I might say will be received as has happened in the past OK there are people who will say that is pathetic and should be TOUGH and STRONG - but I am generally, quite, but there are ways and ways of criticising some are positive some are destructive (like that letter CD got from a comrade which prompted that great thing she wrote for the Internal Bulletin which I found really helpful and thought-provoking and supportive & have also shown round to lots of people as an example of what is BF All About, what does being in BF mean - sorry back to the point). Well destructive criticism does just that - destroys me. Makes me feel thoroughly inadequate and incapable. Also I suppose cos I don't get much personal support within Leeds BF - I don't have any close friends in the group - and so that is a problem... I'm used to writing things I find difficult with at least one other person, then it's easy, but of course being the only lesbian in Leeds BF and feeling I'm identified as the "sexual politics freak" I'm on my own with writing something and no-one outside BF is that motivated to have more than a 5 minute discussion on it... I think isolation is the problem with all that.

The other reason was just not knowing how to say what I wanted to say in a way that wouldn't be alienating and not putting to the working-class women. I know a lot of the way "sexual politics" is talked about both in BF and in the Women's Liberation Movement has been like that, and I don't want to continue that, but I just don't know how to be better. Oh I can talk about it all with any woman for hours, but writing seems different, especially in the conference report which will be taken as some sort of statement.

Then my previous attempt to write about lesbianism. There was what Penny and I wrote in the Internal Bulletin last summer, which looking back was all "oh how terrible and oppressive it is to be gay" which is ridiculous in giving far less than half the picture - nothing about the joy, strength, confidence, POWER that lesbianism, once I'd accepted it, gives me. That I thought came over in Claudette's interview, but you all found that threatening. Like when it came up in our meeting in Leeds (whole group) on The Family and a working-class woman, fairly new to BF, said that the Womens Commission Minutes were "full of lesbianism" (which surprised me a lot cos the Comm'ssion certainly hadn't been - anyway there was just one reference in 6 sides I think) and people "would think we were just a bunch of queers" - and I gulped and tried to talk about the oppression of lesbians in this society - the plight of lesbian mothers losing custody of their kids, which was new to some comrades, well it's not generally known - but I don't WANT to talk always about oppression, making out homosexuals to be this poor group to-be-pitied, I feel

Lesbianism is an expression of confidence in women
Lesbianism is a source of POWER for all women

like it says on the poster by my bed. But I didn't feel it then, I felt wounded in the gut, and miserable, and alone. Even though some of the comrades didn't agree with her, and said a bit - but then the subject changed - I didn't pursue it. Because I didn't know how to express what I felt in a way that would mean something positive to her, not something either disgusting or threatening. And that in itself, my inability to say anything to put over what I feel is political about lesbianism, made me feel even more inadequate. Vicious circle.

The group of women doing the latest Struggle Notes in London say they want something "unheavy" on being gay. I guess I don't know how to be less "heavy".

The same was true to a lesser extent on writing something on "sexuality" I wanted to put over how it is political, how - OK, having orgasms and enjoying sex doesn't cure your leaky roof or buy the kids shoes but

makes you feel a lot better, more confident, happier and stronger in yourself and therefore more able to fight about these things. But that's not what I mean, that you should have good sex cos it helps you be a better socialist. Not at all.

I'd have liked to talk about that in the workshop. Perhaps the lesbian/bisexual women in BF will really get together soon to talk about all this. We may come up with something better than I've been able to produce. From the reactions, it couldn't possibly be worse.

I'm really disappointed to have missed the conference.

love from

al xx

On 14th June I got a reply from Anne in L'pool saying the above was too late for conf. report, but did I object to it going in Inter nal Bulletin - she'd like it to go in. As I'd like it to get round here it is. I hope people don't feel I should have reproduced the original interview and all correspondence too - I thought that would make it all too long, but as it is some may feel they've been misinterpreted and others that they havn't enough info. to judge the situation themselves - anyone feeling this contact me for copies of interview and letters etc..

Thoughts : the suggestion that women should try sleeping with other women is clearly very threatening to lots of women, even those who openly admit to getting the majority if not all their friendship and support from women. It came over strongly to me reading CD's piece how the individuals who upset her, messed her about, fucked her up were all men, how her support came ~~xxx~~ from women. Of course us women don't agree all the time, & I've gone through a time of feeling really unhappy about the relationships between women in Leeds BF (we've got closer again now, are talking more). Yet the idea of getting still closer to women, that you might carry your friendship into bed, or that others should talk about finding strength and joy as well as oppression from society in doing this, is greeted with nervousness and dislike. We could ask ourselves why we feel this way, why ~~ix~~ ~~xxxxix~~ it is to society's advantage to have made us feel this way. Not all societies of the past have had this strong taboo against homosexuality so why does it exist now? Why do the National Front hate and attack 'queers' as well as commies and blacks? How ~~xxx~~ much do the feelings that they so violently express exist within us, BF members, however "tolerant" and "enlightened" we think we are?

Women in BF have talked a lot about sexism within male comrades. How about our own racism? I was born white, that's not my fault: but it IS my fault if I behave in a racist way even if I don't mean to. Like not recognising black people I've met and talked to, on the street, when I'd certainly know ~~xxx~~ who a white person was that I'd met as often: like arranging a meeting in the Trades Club and not knowing enough about Asian culture to understand that the Indian woman who came would be totally freaked out when she got in and discovered it was a pub. - ~~ix~~ Asian women arn't allowed in pubs - some Asian men who were there saw her - her life is hard enough as a single parent who's divorced in the Asian Community - she's on her own and if she breaks too much with her culture's rules she and her children will be cast out entirely. Sure she thinks it's not fair but she doesn't want to give it up, she'd like to change that situation and make Asian women's lot better. We've known her ~~xx~~ 2 years but we hadn't grasped the real reasons why she never comes to the pub with us after playgroup meetings, somehow thought "oh she doesn't want to". This is racist.

And then class. Some times ~~comrades~~ middle class in BF seem to think that be-

cause ~~they~~ we have seen through the bourgeois lie, because we know the working-class is exploited and oppressed by capitalist society in the shape of the bosses, that those of us who come from the boss class (as I do) have somehow magically transcended our class background. That WE never behave in ways that our working-class comrades find oppressive. Well, if we don't actually think this (and I hope nobody does) we don't ever TALK about it. Until it affects us directly I suppose we won't. It all began to hit me very hard when a woman I could have started a sexual relationship with gave as one of her reasons for not wanting to do so that I am middle-class and she isn't. That the people we'd had coffee with that evening (lefties active in their unions etc., not in BF but close to it) made her feel uncomfortable - "things like, what you're supposed to laugh at". This woman got to university but dropped out when she realised the education she was getting, the scene she was mixing with, was taking her far away from her working-class roots, she was beginning to look down on her family - now she's getting politically involved, goes to Womens Liberation meetings and is frightened of the same thing happening. Only at Womens Aid where she works does she feel really all right. And it's all quite true.

It's no good beating our breasts with guilt or alternatively thinking that because we're aware of all these problems they'll magically go away. It's not my fault I was born white and middle-class and thus privileged in this society: is IS my fault if I continue to behave in the oppressive ways that this privilege gives me. I can't "give" power to oppressed groups of whom I'm not a member (as a woman I can fight for the power of women, as a lesbian for the power of gay people). I can though fight those who try to hinder ~~these~~ people taking control of their lives, I can speak out against racism and get together with others to actively oppose it without trying to in any way tell black people what to do. I will probably make a lot of mistakes do insensitive things in the process but I can and must try.

I know all our struggles are linked - there's no individual solutions. Unless we all have power and control none of us will. That's why I'm in a mixed revolutionary ~~xxxxxxx~~ organisation. But unless we can openly talk about the differences within the organisation, we won't be able to ^{go} outwards and fight the ~~xxxxxxx~~ big oppressors, the real enemy, in a unified way. A lot of our current difficulties hinge on class. We must confront this ~~xxxxxxx~~ oh my middle-class comrades before the working-class members get totally pissed off with us, which I wouldn't blame them for at all, and tell us to get out of their organisation because we'll never be anything but oppressive within it. And perhaps I have got completely the wrong end of the stick.

I'm not a person who invents theories and don't pretend to be. I don't want to start apologising for all the inadequacies in this article thereby "covering" myself against forthcoming criticism. Just please don't say "do you really believe all that?" in a voice of disgust like someone once did to me about something I wrote 3 years ago which took me all summer - it's not helpful. And thanks thanks yet again to CD whose piece has given me the courage to actually write all this down for people to read, though I've been thinking it, and talking about it with "safe" people, for ages.

Al G., Leeds, 25/6/77.