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**“WORK
AMONG
WOMEN”**

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from a report delivered by

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at Marx House

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“Work Among Women”



In considering what to say to you this afternoon it seemed to me that what we needed is a restatement of the fundamental attitude of the Communist Party on the problem of work among women, and to proceed then to emphasise what is needed in the way of organisation, so that we can still better carry out our tasks.

We had a good development since we were able to move around more or less freely, since the lifting of the ban very good development in the attention of the party to work among women. At the same time there is evident an insufficient knowledge on the part of our leading committees and our women's committees of how to organise effectively, how to determine the proper content of the work of our Women's Committees, so that the various tasks may be taken up.

I have no doubt that at this date most of you, even if you only began to study in the last year or so, will have had drawn to your attention the statement by Comrade Dimitrov at the 7th Congress that, "There cannot be a successful fight against fascism unless the wide masses of women are drawn into the struggle."

Communists have always held the view that the women masses must be drawn into the proletarian struggle, giving that particular application according to the main developments of the period. At the time Dimitrov spoke it was a case of winning the masses of women for the struggle against fascism and the drive of fascism to war. Since the war developed it has been a case of winning the masses of women for the struggle for victory over the fascist aggressors.

But, of course, since the main aim of the workers' struggle is to smash the rule of the capitalist class and set up workers' rule, it all resolves itself into a question of winning the masses of women to the proletarian movement for socialism.

The extreme importance of this should be obvious to Communists, because history itself has determined that the masses of women are inert and uninformed, even more than men. That being so, it is equally obvious that the proletarian tasks will be more easily realised, the more active, the more conscious and willing is the participation of women in the struggle.

We Communists do not have the view that there is any specific woman question. We do not support any idea leading to a specific woman's movement, because a woman's movement could only be a bourgeois movement. The present system under which we live is the system of the capitalist class and their rule perpetuates the special position of women that has been historically developed, perpetuates that because it is a part of the subjugation by the exploiters of all the exploited classes. For us the question is not the united efforts of all women, but the united efforts of all the exploited against the exploiters. That being so, the interests of the working class demand the recruiting of women into our Party; demand that we should win into our Party women from the factories and the trade unions, from the offices and the trade unions, housewives, farmers' wives and women from the professions.

We do not have in our Party any special women's section. A member of our Party, man or woman, is simply a member of the Party without consideration of sex. In our Party man and woman have equal rights. Either may qualify for leadership, accept responsibility. Leadership and the acceptance of responsibility is not a question of sex, but of ability, experience, training and opportunity.

While that is the fundamental position, nevertheless we see at the same time that, because the bourgeois attitude towards women is dominant, women suffer from a sort of double subjection, or exploitation; that is to say, the women who belong to the exploited classes are either in industry specially exploited by low wages, or in the home they are subject to the male domination and the hangovers of feudal relations.

The daughter may be at one and the same time subject to an employer and subject to the father, and even if the housewife is not directly exploited, she is very seriously affected by the dominant bourgeois attitude towards women, and, of course, that dominant ideology is carried into the ranks of all classes, including the working-class. In addition to that, the problems of women are matters which call for special attention. Without making distinction as a member of the Party between a trade unionist, and one who is not a trade unionist, we realise that there are special problems in industry, and in particular

industries and we have a Trade Union Committee. For other specialities other Committees. So it is no contradiction of our basic attitude to say that we need special attention to women and special Party bodies for work among women, special methods in our work among women.

We need these special bodies so that, as the trade unionists devote special attention to the study of the trade unions, our women's committees devote special attention to the study of the problems of women, to understand their needs, to assist the Party to become connected with the masses of women. We need propagandists in general, and propagandists who can specialise in propaganda among women. In other words, we do need special organs within the Party to specialise in work among women, to equip themselves as Marxists for these special spheres of work.

But in this connection we must immediately connect ourselves once more with our fundamental standpoint, that the Party stands for the interests of the class, that a Party member is a Party member of equal standing be that member man or woman, by seeing that all this problem of work among women is something to be understood not only by women, but by all Party members, and more particularly by the leading committees of the Party, no matter if in some cases they should be entirely composed of men.

History so far has determined that even in our Party the majority of members are men. For a long time we have been driving to raise the percentage of women in our Party; we probably have a larger percentage of women members than any other Party in this country; but from a position of about 16 per cent. to 17 per cent., that is less than 20 in 100, we set out during 1942 to try to raise the proportion of women to 25 per cent., or one in every four. During 1942 we did succeed to step up the proportion of women recruited, thereby raising the average of women throughout the Party; but, notwithstanding that conscious attention, we find that during this year the proportion of women recruited tended to fall to about the same level as that of the proportion of women already in the Party.

I mention that fact merely to underline that there is a special problem, that women are, as I have said earlier, more inert and uninformed than men, and that being so, we have to do something about it, conscious of that limitation and conscious of our duty to do everything we can to overcome that backwardness.

Well, if more than 80 per cent. of our Party membership is men (and that is yet the case), we see that the men of our leading committees ought to understand, even better than most women so far, the whole problem. It has been determined so far by history that men acquire in bigger proportion an interest in political problems, take up

in bigger proportion than women activity in the spheres of politics and trade unionism.

If our men accept, as I am sure they would all say they do, the standpoint of the Party that we cannot be successful in our struggles unless we win to our side the masses of exploited women, then, of course, these men of ours in leading committees must equip themselves with an understanding of the special problems of women, with an understanding of the special methods required for successful work among women, with an understanding of the content of the work of our women's committees, the proper composition of these committees, and so on. Only when they do that will they be able to help greater numbers of our women to become no less able than themselves to be leaders of the proletarian struggle, leaders of the work in the Party.

Well, the fact that we have had a series of State conferences undoubtedly indicates improvement, indicates that we have women's committees able to work, that our leading Party committees have some appreciation of the special task involved. But, even so, the experiences of the last two years, more especially the review of the work during the last few months, make it clear that if we are to go forward, if our women's committees are to become more effective in their work, if our leading Party committees are to better guide that work, if our women's committees are to justify their special existence, then we must all of us acquire a better understanding of the content of the work than has yet been shown, and this applies whether we are thinking of our women's committees in a specific sense or merely a comrade responsible in a district, zone or branch for work among women.

Comrades, the phrase, "work among women," is the answer; it is not a case of "women's work," it is a case of work among women, and unless our women's committees are going to study and organise work among women, they might as well not exist. If it is propaganda, we have a propaganda committee; if it is a factory and union, we have a trade union committee; if it is youth, we have a youth committee; if it is organisation, we have our organisational committee.

And it became quite clear, comrades, during this year, that under the impact of the big drive to build the Party, our women's committees, while not neglecting work among women, tended to devote too much of their time to the organisational questions that are the main concern of the organisational committee.

One must say that so far the organisational committees know better than the women's committees how to study and deal with Party organisational problems, and, if that is so, we do not need another committee doubling up on that work. It does not mean that women's

committees should not be interested in recruiting, it is a question of what should be the main content.

Well, as I said, we have a propaganda committee. The propaganda committee's task is to consider how to develop the main line of the Party's propaganda amongst the masses as a whole, but for our women's committees, our women's committees whether they are composed of men and women or only women, their business in the sphere of propaganda is to consider what and how and where in the matter of propaganda among women.

They should study the needs of women so that they can adapt special propaganda and agitation among women, whether in the industries, the locality, or on general social questions that affect women, both in industry and in the home.

There are a great number of special organisations of women and organisations that include women, for instance, the trade unions. There are factories that employ women, some in small proportion, some in very large proportions; there are all the problems involved in the differential wage rate as between men and women, all the new problems that have arisen during the war connected with the carrying out of Government policy in the new occupations filled by women through the W.E.B.

The housewife has her special problems, she is probably even more acutely interested in the question of rent than her husband; probably more acutely interested in the price of household foods than her husband, and the housewife is also interested in the general wages problem, and the basic wage, because upon the level of the basic wage and the margins that are paid in the various industries depends the standard of living of the family.

The housewife is interested in schools, even if she has not yet reached the point of having any interest whatever in the curriculum. You know that they are interested every winter, as it comes round here in Sydney, about the comfort of the children in many of the ill-equipped schools.

The housewife is interested in child care, and to-day women in industry are more interested in child care than ever before. Whereas prior to the war you would find widows and wives of invalid husbands in industry, and maybe a few others who had gone into industry so as to expand the family income, during the war period greater numbers of women, many because of an understanding of the need for production, others because they have been attracted by the big drive and the possibility of earning more money, including women with families, have entered industry, so that child care has assumed very big proportions indeed.

Then, of course, there are the problems of the country women.

It is many years since it was pointed out to our leaders of women's committees, to comrades charged with the responsibility about work among women, that they should get to know how many organisations existed catering exclusively for women, or including in their programme the interests of women. That knowledge should extend right down to the locality, discovering in the locality what organisations exist in the particular area. Well, I am sure that neither our leading women's committees nor our local women's committees yet have an adequate knowledge about these organisations. I am sure that even the Central Women's Committee could not tell me how many women's organisations there are in Australia, what are their constitutions, what are their aims, nor will they have as much knowledge as is desirable about the trade unions that enrol women, what are the rights of women within these unions, and a knowledge of the various awards applying particularly to women.

All this is very important, for many reasons, including, for instance, the fact that it would be possible in many cases, if we had this knowledge, and we met members of certain women's organisations, for us to say to them in the light of their own programmes, "Here is a point and here is another one that is also included in the programme of the Communist Party on behalf of women."

Wherever that is the case, of course, we have an immediate step to unity. You have such and such a demand, so have we; therefore, we have something in common, whatever our differences may be.

But we Communists must go further than that, comrades, and include in an understanding of and provision for peculiar problems of women, the study of the problems of women in the Party.

The general position is that the man comrade goes to the factory or the office, the railway or whatever it may be; he puts in his working hours and except for shift work complications, he can go to the Branch meeting, he can go to the class, he can go to the trade union. If there are children, however, his wife cannot do the same thing on the same night, and there is obviously an organisational problem to be solved, not merely between man and wife, but by the Party Branch, the Party Committee.

We have come across the rigid idea, for instance, that a woman cannot belong to the Party unless she can attend the Branch meeting; well, if the reason why she cannot attend the Branch meeting is a young child, we have to get rid of the stupidity that she cannot be a member of the Communist Party because she cannot attend the Branch meeting.

We have for some time been trying to solve many similar difficulties

by the appointment of what we call group organisers, according to the size of the Branch, two or three or more Party members who will look after a group of branch members, maybe according to where they live, maybe according to where they work. Why not, then, according to their special circumstances, such as difficulty in leaving the home? If our women in Branches can only meet in the daytime because of the children, it is up to the Branch or Zone to solve the question of enabling these women to come together, become acquainted with Party policy, that there is some connection between the unavoidable meeting of women and the Branch meeting. Zones and districts must organise classes in a way that will meet the special problems of the housewife. Why not if we do that for a shift worker, be the shift worker man or woman?

One thing that stood out no less than any other last week-end was this problem of our women members and their children. Until there is adequate public provision for child care, that, comrades, is a question of organisation by ourselves. Fortunately we are beginning to apply some experiences. Some months ago in Adelaide I found that the manpower problem had been met by a number of our women standing up to the demands made upon them and accepting ever more responsibility in the Party work, but they could not neglect their children. I made a number of suggestions; I cannot say I knew exactly what the answer would be. I said, "What about turning one of these offices into a nursery or playroom, and find out if there is a woman without children, or whose children are sufficiently grown-up to look after themselves, to come in, appreciating the political work you women do, and agree to look after these children while you are attending to your Party work?" They have done something like that in the intervening period, and I understand North Sydney is doing something similar.

In a local area a similar voluntary movement is developing, not as a movement merely for Party people, but for all the local citizens, and it fits in and will be of benefit to mothers who are members of the Party in that area.

I have asked that the Adelaide story and the North Sydney and the local stories, and any others, shall be placed on record in sufficient detail, and published in the "Forward," so that our comrades everywhere may see what is possible.

It is not surprising that that special problem has become more acute than ever it was before, because even if the proportion of women is not increasing, the absolute number of women in the Party has increased along with the growth of the Party.

More than that, our women have demonstrated what it means to be equals in a Party; have shown what they can do, when they have the

opportunity, when the demand is made upon them. Owing to the loss of so many men from civil Party work, greater numbers of women are carrying responsibility as branch secretaries, zone leaders, district committee members, secretaries, and so on and so forth. In one case we have a State Secretary who is a mother. So the problem of organising proper care for the children, so that our mothers can carry out their political work, is something which just had to be solved.

Without relaxing the struggle for public facilities, I hope to see more such solutions and consequently less possibility of our women at conferences becoming emotional about these problems and tending to become tearful about them.

I want to refer again to the question of the work of the women's committees and to emphasise that once more before proceeding to discuss the composition of the committees. Maybe the best way to do it is to run through the various other committees and show the relationship.

First of all, of course, a committee for work among women, like a trade union committee and agitation-propaganda committee, is a sub-committee, an auxiliary of the leading Party committee. Its work is subject to the leading Party committee, the Central committee, etc.

If there is a woman in the branch or man in the branch accepting responsibility for work among women, the control lies with the Branch; that should be understood.

We have a trade union committee. Naturally its existence is made necessary and is justified by a special concentration on trade union questions. It does not mean that the trade union committee pays no concern to recruiting, or to questions of Party structure, but the Party building drive is primarily the business of the organisational committee, next to the leading committee, of course.

We have the agitation and propaganda committees, I have already indicated their main concern; that does not mean that the trade union committee has no interest in propaganda, but the trade union committee must not lose sight of its main interest, which is the trade unions. The agitation and propaganda committee is not uninterested in trade unions, but its main concern is agitation and propaganda, leaflets, press, radio, demonstrations, Marx House, and so on, and that way of estimating can be applied to all the committees.

The Women's Committee must not neglect the factories and the unions, because there are women in factories and unions, but they must see to it that they do not create difficulties by taking up general trade union questions or questions which, while they may primarily concern women, also concern men, without finding out the views of the trade union committee.

Our women are not uninterested in agitation and propaganda; they should make suggestions to the propaganda committee, if in their opinion it is not giving adequate or proper attention to women in the course of its work. They may even consult with the specialists of the agitation and propaganda committee about the form, content and make-up of their own special propaganda to women.

The Women's Committees must encourage our women to consider drawing new women into the Party in the course of their work among women. They will no doubt gain experiences, good ones and bad ones, in relation to Party building among women. Rather than develop their own special ideas on this, sending them out as a committee for work among women, it would be better to acquaint the organisational committee with these experiences, and so on.

I emphasise for the members of our leading committees, as well as members of women's committees, that you cannot go wrong if you bear in mind the women masses, never lose sight of the conception—work among women.

We do not, or at least we should not, call our conferences "women's conferences"; we should call them conferences on work among women, because that is what they really are, and we expect the leading committees to attend these conferences, to be represented in the person of their most able leaders, whether men or women.

Now about the composition.

The committee for work among women, that is, a department of the Central Committee, if it is to be effective, it must necessarily include a number of women. There are some spheres of work into which men could not very well intrude, contact with the non-political women is usually more easily made by women, to a certain extent, no doubt, women will understand the problems of women better than men.

But whether it be men or women, one or more of the men leaders of the Central Committee or a State Committee should also be a member of the committee for work among women. That idea can be applied appropriately right down through the Party structure. It is not because men are inherently superior to women; it is, as I indicated earlier more than once, the historical development has been such that greater numbers of men take an interest in economic and political questions; greater numbers of men have been doing so during a lifetime, so you have the result in every country in the world so far, greater numbers of men occupy responsible positions in the Party than women. These men are not doing their job unless they so organise their forces that they can give the benefit of their theoretical training and their practical Party experience to a committee for work among women, no less than to a trade union committee and an agitation propaganda

committee, an organisational committee, youth committee or any other committee.

That is still not completely understood and, more than that, it is still not given practical application in all too many instances.

Our leading committees in some cases salve their conscience by setting up a women's committee, a committee for work among women, and leaving them more or less to their own resources, then becoming irritated when the more alert and determined of these women go along and prod them into giving some advice and assistance.

In the districts it may not be feasible in every case to have a definite sub-committee; the district must determine that. But there should be no district without a member of that committee responsible for work among women. In that case occasional meetings of other comrades interested, carrying responsibility in zone and branch, could be arranged, until one day we will get a committee. Similarly in zones. We have yet to determine whether we want local Party committees for work among women. It seems to me that in the case of large branches, with suitable leadership in branch and district, it may become necessary to have a committee for work among women, certainly, local branches should have a comrade responsible and linked to Zone, or District Committee.

The numbers of a committee for work among women need not, in any case, be very large—three, five, maybe seven, in the case of a very big Party organisation. What can be done, then, in order to widen the contact, draw in a wider experience, is, according to the subject matter that is going to appear on the agenda of the women's committee, to call in all those who may be able to make a worth-while contribution. At the centre, for instance, if it is a question of women's wages, the committee will consult women trade union organisers, women in factories, and men who are leaders of trade unions, to give advice and assistance.

That method can be applied in other ways. If it is child care, if we have the possibility to consult with some members of a child welfare committee, mothers' committee, and so forth, there is much to be gained.

A committee that is few in numbers, ever ready to widen out by drawing other people into consultation.

I have said repeatedly that the main content must be work among women and, that being so, experience has shown that it is necessary to utter a warning, because the conception may be generalised about too much and applied to all and every woman in the Party. If a woman comrade becomes district secretary, that woman comrade is district secretary and her work is just the same as that of a man who is a dis-

trict secretary, and it is absurd to say in that case, that because she is a woman she must join a mothers' club, child welfare committee or nursery organisation, and so on and so forth. If she is doing a good job, then she is doing mass work, though probably not special mass work among women.

Then, of course, I realise it is going to be very difficult in a great many cases for our women members with domestic responsibilities, including children, to find the organisational solution that would enable such comrades, not only to be connected with the Party branch, but to be connected with some non-party women's organisation; but, like every other such problem, it is mainly one of organisation. Maybe, first of all, to help our women comrades and the men involved to understand the importance of being connected with wide masses of women.

One thing is certain, comrades, and it is this, that when we do succeed to win a woman into our Party because of our work amongst women in some organisation or organisations, it is a crime if that woman is induced or allowed to begin to do so-called Party work and turn her back upon the masses of women with whom she used to be associated in the mothers' club, or whatever it was.

The only case where that is justified is where it is consciously approached as a question of organisation and the decision is made, this comrade has ability to do this, that or the other, and consequently we decide, with her agreement, that she shall accept new responsibility which may lead to her not having time to remain where she was, but as I have said, comrades, whether we have been discussing women, youth or many other things, it is utterly absurd this business of people, drawn into the Party, being caught up in what is described as "Party work" and deserting the sphere of mass work.

Everyone is agreed that that would not be tolerated about the trade unions, are we not? Well, why tolerate it in other spheres? I heard not so long ago about a Branch of the Friendship with Russia Committee; the Communists had done good work in relation to the members of this Friendship with Russia Committee in a factory; they won several into the Party, and that was the end of the Friendship with Russia Committee in the factory. Just downright stupidity.

What kind of Party work could they possibly be doing that would prevent them from carrying on? We win people from mass organisations into our Party to be trained and helped to carry on as Communists, among the masses from where they were won into the Party. If the Party turns into itself, then we do not win masses, we draw people away from the masses, and this in part explains why we do not grow as rapidly as some of us think we should grow.

That partly explains why the percentage of women in the Party does not grow, but the conference last week-end in Sydney did display in the credentials report a rather good connection on the part of the women present with mass organisations, so that seems to contradict what I say.

I think, first of all, the explanation is that the most active women turn up to conferences, the most conscious women, the most experienced women on the average turn up to conferences; but then there is another reason for the lack in recruiting in general, and the lack in recruiting of women, and that is the submergence of the identity of the Party and identity of the individual as a Communist. I am afraid that even in that very representative gathering last week-end, if we could probe into all of them we would find that a very large number of these women are not known to be Communists by the people amongst whom they work, that they are sent into this activity by the Branch or in some other way drawn into it and, without any good reason whatever, just hide their Party identity. That itself demands a warning, because I do not want to create the impression that we want everyone to wear a red star; we do not want everyone to say in a simple way, "I am a Communist." We know there are cases where the identity could only be disclosed to the detriment of the individual, or some family connection, or the work; but if there is no reason, no reason of victimisation, if there is no real evidence that it would lead to dissolution of the particular activity, then there is no reason why one's identity as a Communist should be hidden.

On all questions affecting women, the Communist Party should carry on its propaganda, indicating to the masses of the women that their needs are included in the Communist Party's programme.

Wherever possible, Communist Branches, Zones, Districts, States should be represented as the Communist Party on committees that are set up, they should go to conferences in the name of the Communist Party, and in cases where a woman is drawn into some activity because she lives in the neighbourhood, is a citizen in the neighbourhood, if she is a Communist, if there is no real reason for covering up the identity, the membership, it should not be done because it does not help the work, and it does not help the Communist Party. You need not wave a flag and parade the fact, but it should be seen that as a Communist you work in unity with the others, as a Communist you stand for the demands of the people you are associated with, better still, as a Communist you do the work better than anyone else.

It does not help much to advance the influence of the Party to have the best secretary in an organisation if no one knows that that man or woman is a Communist.

Over the years, where there is no evidence to hide the identity of a woman, very few exceptions, there is no reason whatsoever for not revealing the policy of the Communist Party on a particular question.

When we become known, others may say, "that you are a Communist," if they do, and if you have done well and really done as you set with the demands of the particular group, in that case, most people will say, "Well, that is what the Communist stand for, they have good sense, that is what we want, let us go ahead and work on someone and not retreat just because someone says, 'The Communist are among us'."

If we do that, get rid of this submergence and get a proper connection in the work of our committees, do work amongst women, then, I think, we will raise the percentage of women in the Party.

Only by becoming known as an active Communist will it be possible to attract people who are seeking that way into the Party, only by becoming known as a Communist will it be demonstrated that a Communist is a good leader on behalf of the masses, and thereby able to attract people around the Communist Party and eventually into it, and only by being amongst the masses will we have the chance to be able to draw from the vast reservoir of women many more recruits to the Communist Party.

Comrades, that is just about all there is to say about this, you know as well as I do what are the main demands to seize upon at the present moment—prices, black markets, rents, houses, child care, work, leading everything to depend upon our attitude to the war, the movement, and the aim of unity for victory, having in mind our proletarian viewpoint.

The more broadly we work, the more necessary it will become to have a real knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, because the more broadly we work the more will you come up against bourgeois and feminist ideas on the woman question. We must be equipped not to quarrel with these women, but to teach them, and to avoid becoming submerged by their particular ideas, to avoid being pushed aside in our outlook by their particular ideas.

If we do that and learn how to speak to women about Socialism, showing to them that while we can struggle for this demand and the other demand, and make some progress, nevertheless, only the abolition of the exploitation of man by man will make it possible for women to be economically, socially, and politically the equal of man. Then we will win over more women to follow the leadership of the Communist Party, not only to win this war, but to win the battle for Socialism, which will mean the emancipation of women as well as men.