

COMMUNISM AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST SEXISM

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS SEXISM?

By sexism we mean the way class society is organized around the inequality of women relative to men. The main aspect of sexism is the special oppression of women of the working class. (The ideology that **justifies the** special oppression of women in class society is sometimes also called sexism, or male chauvinism. To avoid confusion, we will use the term “sexist ideology” for this.) For example, in the world today:

- Women’s industrial wages average only threequarters of the wages of men. (You might call **this “six hours pay for eight hours work”!**)
- Women are sold as child-brides and forced into other forms of prostitution,
- Female infanticide is again increasingly common **in China and India.**
- In some countries, a woman’s word officially counts for less than a man’s word in court, which effectively legalizes rape.

Class society in the world today is capitalism. Therefore, sexism today is an **aspect of capitalism and we cannot end sexism without ending capitalism.** Only communism—the **end of class society—can** end sexism. On the other hand, it is impossible to destroy capitalism without destroying sexism. To retain aspects of sexism in a society trying to destroy capitalism would be similar to retaining racial segregation, or separate nations, or wages. It would mean keeping **elements of** capitalism that would lay the basis for the restoration of full-blown capitalism. So it is very important that we understand the particularities of sexism in capitalist society today. In fighting them our movement lays the basis for smashing sexism once we take power

No one has a crystal ball to see into the future, but it is **useful** to begin now to think concretely about how communism would change the position of women in society. Our vision of the future, and our confidence in the workers' ability to create this future, motivate our political work as much, if not even more, than our hatred of the capitalists and their vicious system. A better understanding of sexism will deepen our understanding of capitalist institutions and ideology and how to fight them. In particular, it should help us sharpen the struggle to win women workers and students to take more leadership in the work of the party.

MEN WORKERS: JOIN WITH WOMEN WORKERS TO FIGHT SEXISM

Marxists traditionally have spoken of the "woman question," but the fight against sexism is also in the vital interest of working class men. A working class divided against itself, men against women, will never be able to take and hold power. As the Chinese communists put it, "women hold up half the sky." A working class that does not struggle for equality within its ranks cannot possibly create a communist world. A working class that does not recognize the

significance of "women's work" in the home will be at a loss to organize an economic system of production and distribution based on a voluntary association of workers.

Working class men still think sometimes that, at least in the short run, sexism works to their advantage. After all, isn't it easier to sit down and relax after a hard day at work than it is to share the household chores? Doesn't a man have a better chance at a job if the boss refuses to hire a woman for the position? But this is a very short-sighted point of view, from an economic and an emotional perspective as well as from a political one. Men workers who join actively in the fight against sexism live better as a result, just as workers who join in **the** communist movement are better for it, even if it turns out that we don't live to see a communist world. As an aspect of capitalism, sexism oppresses and exploits all workers. It divides the strength of the working class by creating barriers between men workers and women workers. It weakens the fighting ability of individual workers by encouraging stereotyped and self-destructive ways of life and thought among both women and men. So the fight against sexism is in the interest of the whole working class.

At the same time, we must

recognize that women of the working class shoulder a greater burden of sexist exploitation than men of the working class. They are more intensively exploited by the bosses, often forced into the lowest-paying job categories, or paid less than men doing the same work. Among the low-paid workers in Mexico City, for example, women are twice as likely as men to be earning *less* than the minimum wage. Women suffer higher rates of poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy, especially in countries with the worst poverty generally.

While bosses harass all workers, women workers are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment on the job. Most working class women in all countries (married and single) work a "double shift," coming home from a paid job to hours and hours more of unpaid housework and/or child care. We can only build unity among men and women workers by fighting together against these and other aspects of inequality. In addition, most women have to deal with (oppressive attitudes and actions of jealous, demanding, or domineering male partners, relatives, and friends who have fallen for the bosses' sexist lies. The fight for equality among women and men workers therefore is reflected within our movement, our households, and our circle of friends.

SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sexism existed in other forms of class society before capitalism. In fact, class society probably began with the subjection of women to men. We know that in all societies based on private property, in which property is inherited in the male line (father to son), the woman also became the legal property of her husband. In this way, he tried to ensure that "his" property would go to "his" sons. The vast majority of people had no property anyway, but they were still bound by the laws and customs — sanctified by Judaism, by Islam, and by Christianity, among other religions — enforced by the ruling class in its own interest.

Survivals of feudalism in the twentieth century suggest how harsh the oppression of women could be. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, for example, women of Uzbekistan were forced to wear dark, evil-smelling horsehair veils; they slept on the floor beside the couch on which the husband slept, so he could kick her awake when he wanted anything.

In the early to mid 1800s it looked as though industrial capitalism might break the chains that had kept women legally enslaved to their fathers and

husbands within the family. Women of the working class were being drawn into European and North American factories as a source of cheap labor. Many, including Marx and Engels at times, seemed to think that the special oppression of women would be ended in this way. Of course, working-class women would still be chained side by side with men workers to wage-slavery. But at least they would be fighting to break these chains on the basis of equality of exploitation.

There was some truth to this. Women workers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led many heroic battles of the class struggle. The **“United Tailoresses of New York”** struck for higher wages in 1825. The black women of the **“Washerwomen’s Association of Atlanta,”** thousands strong, struck for higher pay in **1881**. Women workers in Mexico repeatedly led strikes in the tobacco industry between 1880 and 1885, demanding higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions for all workers. The Russian revolution of February 1917 was sparked by a demonstration led by the women workers of the Vyborg district of Petrograd in honor of International Women’s Day. Many more such stories brighten the pages of the history of the inter-

national working class.

But equality of women and men — even equality of exploitation — didn’t come about. In fact, as capitalism developed fully into its imperialist stage, the special oppression of women workers (most of all, those identified as “racial” or ethnic minorities) actually intensified. Imperialists and their agents became increasingly adept at using sexism to their own advantage, drawing women into the wage labor force during labor **shortages** (for example, wartime) and forcing **them** out when, with increasing frequency and severity, economic crises demanded reductions in the wage labor force.

One example is the effect of the international crisis of 1907-8 on the working class of Mexico. Both the numbers of women and the percentage of women among all workers dropped in nearly every sector of the economy. In 1910, women comprised only 25% of industrial workers and 40% of service workers, but 58% of the unemployed. Around 1.3 million women workers were driven out of the work force altogether, compared with half a million men.

Some examples from the United States show how the capitalists used state power to drive **women out** of the work force during economic depres-

sion. The **Highland Park**, Michigan city council excluded married women from municipal jobs in 1921, and, soon after, excluded single women as well. The federal Economy **Act** of 1930 responded to mass unemployment by prohibiting spouses from both holding jobs in the federal government. Some city governments went a step further, outlawing the employment of married women whose husbands earned a "living wage" as defined by the law. By 1939, such laws were on the books in 26 states.

During World War II, in contrast, as men were drafted women were urged to "take the job he left behind." Government propagandists distributed films and posters showing happy women (complete with make-up) working as welders and in other traditionally male jobs. Bourgeois psychologists cooperated by proclaiming that breastfeeding (and too much maternal attention generally) was bad for children. The very real problems of single working mothers were conveniently ignored. And once the war ended, the psychologists quickly decided that children needed their mothers' full-time attention after all. The TVs that appeared in nearly every American home by 1960 provided a still more powerful weapon to push the stereotyped families of "The

Donna Reed Show," "Ozzie and Harriet," "Leave It To Beaver," and "Father Knows Best."

A long-term trend can be found underneath these calculated short-term manipulations of the labor market. As U.S. imperialism gained access to the cheaper labor of workers (children, men, women) in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, it had less need of the labor of children or women in the United States itself. In Puerto Rico, for example, fewer than 10% of women worked outside the home in 1899; thirty years later, after U.S. imperialism reshaped the Puerto Rican economy to its own ends, over 25% of women had outside jobs. Of course, they still had their own housework to do.

U.S. workers (including both men and women) had long demanded the so-called "family wage": pay for men workers high enough to support their wives and children. They had demanded restrictions on women's work (in the name of "protection") and educational opportunities for their children. Since women who worked for wages (especially if they were married and/or had children) came home to another full day of unpaid housework, they often preferred not to hold an outside job. Consider, for example, that until very recently black married women in the U.S. worked outs-

ide their own homes in proportionally far greater numbers than white married women. In 1920, for example, about 33% of black wives worked for wages, compared to about 6% of white wives. Since black women were segregated into the least desirable jobs (mostly as domestic workers for white families), this was scarcely a measure of their greater "liberation"!

The bosses had fought the workers' demands ferociously as long as their profits depended on the low-paid labor of U.S. children and adult women. By the 1920s, the rise of U.S. imperialism — together with technological changes in production — had changed things. Legal restrictions on the labor of children and of women were enacted. Free public education was extended to teenagers and made compulsory. In 1910, under 15% of 14- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. attended school; by 1940 the figure was over 70%.

But as with other reforms achieved under capitalism, these were quickly turned against the workers. School officials announced proudly that their institutions fostered social control through "Americanization": the indoctrination of young workers with every rotten idea the bosses could think of. The role of the "housewife" was glorified to suit the needs of the capitalists for a

flexible labor force and increasing consumption of the products of industry. Bosses could now justify sexist wage differentials with the lie that since men workers could support their families, women's income was "only supplemental" or "pin money." Sexist ideology also helped capitalists to blunt the anger of the working class in the face of the attack on their standard of living brought about by rising unemployment. Let's look at this a bit more closely.

The sexist organization of advanced capitalist society has had a profoundly negative impact on the way workers and others think about themselves in relation to the social system. For one thing, housework and childcare were necessary for the reproduction of labor power, caring for workers' day-to-day needs and raising the next generation of workers. But these activities didn't produce surplus value for the bosses, so in capitalist terms they weren't "productive labor," since the capitalists consider "productive" only that labor which produces a profit. Capitalist ideology, turning the world on its head as usual, therefore declared that women were inherently useless and naturally dependent on men.

Meanwhile, food, clothes, health care, and other traditional products of "women's work" were increasingly made by wage

labor (often low-paid women) and bought in the market. A large part of the job of the "housewife" was to shop for her family: she was to be a "consumer" rather than a "producer." Advertisers pushed new products and appliances in the name of household efficiency and a "better" life through the accumulation of material possessions. *Surprisingly, many studies from the 1920s on revealed that the average time spent by the U.S. woman on housework remained nearly the same over a period of at least fifty years: over 50 hours a week.*

U.S. President Herbert Hoover declared in March, 1929 that "we are a happy people—the statistics prove it. We have more cars, more bathtubs, oil furnaces, silk stockings, bank accounts than any other people on earth." The "model" family of this bosses' fairytale **lived comfortably on** the husband's earnings, with the kids in school and the wife venturing from home mainly to go shopping. But the most oppressed women — including, for example, black women in the U.S. and women workers in the countries ravaged by imperialism — still had to work both outside and inside the home. In the following decades, during war and peace, in "good" times and "bad" times, more and more women (married and single) were forced to juggle low-paying

jobs and home responsibilities. By 1980, only 6% of U.S. households matched this "model."

As we will see, women's "juggling act" is at the core of sexism in capitalist society. The incorporation of virtually the entire world into the capitalist system during the era of imperialism has increased the oppression of women. It has devastated most brutally the lives of women as well as men workers in regions most intensely exploited by the imperialists. But it has not "liberated" women in the so-called "advanced" capitalist countries either.

WOMEN WORKERS IN TODAY'S CAPITALISM

Women of the working class in almost every country of the world are generally worse off today than their **great-great-grandmothers** were a century ago, in spite of reforms aimed at improving conditions for women. In the Peruvian highlands, for example, industries producing for export **drew workers (mostly men) into wage-work and away from food production for use rather than for sale.** Food production for individual {or community} use (in which women had a measure of control over their own work) was replaced in rural areas by industrial livestock raising and

mechanized agriculture, under the control of a wealthy, urban-based landowning class dominated by men. Women, too, have now been drawn into seasonal and part-time wage labor. The standard of living of most Indian families has dropped. Well over a third of Peruvian families are now headed by single women, most of whom work in both subsistence agriculture and sporadically for wages, while raising their families alone. Traditional community support structures were destroyed, and few if any social services to replace them are available for poor women and their children.

As this example shows, worsening conditions for **women** workers reflect, to a large extent, the declining position of the working class as a whole as capitalism develops in its normal way, creating a tiny, increasingly privileged ruling class side by side with a vast impoverished mass of working people. But women of the working class bear a disproportionate burden of this crisis. **In the U.S., for example, a far greater percentage of women than of men live in poverty. In Thailand, it is common for impoverished families to send their daughters into brothels, where many are already dying from AIDS. While black men in South Africa are drawn to the cities for exploitation as wage laborers,**

the women and children in their families have been forced to remain behind in barren "homelands" under conditions of **the harshest poverty.**

The political form of capitalism in crisis is fascism, and the growth of fascism in the world today is intensifying sexism. Fascism simultaneously revives pre-capitalist forms of the oppression of women, and creates new ones. As the example of Nazi Germany showed -with its slogan that women should be concerned only with "children, church, and kitchen"-virulent sexism is a hallmark of fascism.

Today, perhaps the main ideological form this takes is religious. Christian fascists in U.S. and Eastern Europe attack birth control and abortion, as well as any call for equality among women and men, under the slogan of "upholding traditional values." (They even object to illustrations in textbooks showing such horrors as boys knitting or girls fixing cars.) In the Persian Gulf region, Jewish and Islamic fascists play the same role.

But **not all fascist forms of sexist ideology are religious.** For example, in the name of "science," sociobiology claims to prove, among other ridiculous things, that men are genetically programmed to "play the field" and women to monogamy. Other as-

pects of fascist culture are even more viciously anti-woman. Violence against women of the sort once confined to porno flicks is now found increasingly in "mainstream" popular music (and music videos) and in the movies. Although accurate figures are hard to come by, real violence against real women (notably rape and wife-beating) also seems to be on the rise.

Whether in a religious or a secular form, sexist ideology does not simply "reflect" the increasing actual oppression of women. Rather, it plays an active role by making this oppression seem "natural" and therefore encourages such behavior. Furthermore, sexist ideology fuels fascist mass movements in many parts of the world.

BOURGEOIS FEMINISM ATTACKS WOMEN WORKERS

Bourgeois women have been affected by sexism in two opposite ways. On one hand, they occupy a second-class position within their own class. For example, they are raped, abused by their husbands, denied political, economic, and social rights available to men of their class. On the other hand — and this is the main thing — they also benefit from the sexism that (for example) provides them with a cheap source of domestic labor, and that

helps maintain their class comfortably in power. Occasionally these women organize under feminist banners against discriminatory laws and practices that affect them personally: for example, the bourgeois Saudi Arabian women who demanded the right to drive their own cars.

Such bourgeois feminism represents a selfish effort on the part of women of the ruling class to secure for themselves as individuals an equal "right" to benefit from the exploitation of the working class. In this quest, their opponents are the men of their class. Women workers must resist the calls of bourgeois feminists for the "unity of all women," a unity the bourgeois quickly forget when it comes to their housekeeper or their secretary. Workers must reject the fundamental demands of bourgeois feminism (more women senators, more women judges, more women corporation executives), which is the form in which women of the ruling class assert their "right" also to be "free" to exploit the working class. And workers must also reject its individualist and anti-male ideology.

Petit-bourgeois women have historically been attracted to bourgeois feminism because it promotes their own goals of professional and educational advancement. As the decline of

capitalism accelerates, however, and fascism brings an intensification of **sexism** on all fronts, many of these women mistakenly think feminism is a radical challenge to the system, rather than what it really is: a way to advance *within* the system. They are wrong. Feminism is incapable of leading a serious fight against sexism. It is less and less able to win even the demands of petit-bourgeois women. It has no answers for working class women.

One significant example is the “pro-choice” movement in the United States, the goal of which is to uphold the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision that said that states could not make abortion illegal. Some of these activists correctly warn that anti-abortion (“pro-life”) is an issue used cynically by right-wing demagogues (who support imperialist war, capital punishment, and racist killer cops) to mobilize mass support for fascists of the Jesse Helms/David Duke variety. But what kind of movement are the feminists themselves trying to organize? It is a movement based ideologically on bourgeois individualism (“choice”), not class interest. Rich women have always been able to get reasonably safe abortions, legal or not.

The main issue in the abortion debate is not an abstract “woman’s right to control her own body,” but actual access to

adequate health care for the working class. The main effect of making abortion illegal is that more working-class women — especially black women — die in back-alley operations or from complications of self-induced abortions. But the fight against racist and sexist cutbacks in health care is a bitter class struggle against the bosses, for whom these cutbacks are an essential part of their fascist plan to rebuild the competitiveness of U.S. capitalism at the cost of workers’ lives. The feminist movement as such cannot even support this workers’ struggle, much less lead it, because to do so would sacrifice the fundamental feminist principle of uniting “all women.” As the Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai put it in 1920, “in a society based on class contradictions there is no room for a women’s movement indiscriminately embracing all women.”

The “pro-choice” movement decided early on to embrace the bourgeois woman rather than the woman worker. It is therefore reduced to a strategy of slick public-relations campaigns to raise money for electoral politics. What a loser! As if any bourgeois politician will put the health of the workers ahead of the health of the bosses’ pocketbooks! Meanwhile, fascist-led mobs, undeterred by governmental au-

thorities, are blockading and fire-bombing clinics where abortions are performed. Only communist revolution — not liberal politicians — can defeat the bosses' fascism. By trying to lead women workers into the arms of the "anti-sexist" or "pro-choice" politicians, liberal feminists are actually strengthening the hand of the fascists.

The **PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY** also rejects more radical-sounding formulations that go by the names of "socialist-feminism" or "marxist feminism." Sexism is not a separate system of male domination ("patriarchy") existing side by side with capitalism, as these feminists claim. Only in the realm of abstraction can the oppression of women be separated from the exploitation of the working class.

Feminism in whatever form undermines the unity of the working class by calling into question the possibility of women and men working together as comrades in the struggle to destroy capitalism and to build egalitarian communism. As communists we reject this cynical point of view. In our movement we are already building the real friendships and confidence among men and women that pop psychologists and feminists have called an impossible dream.

COMMUNISM, NOT FEMINISM, FIGHTS SEXISM

In contrast to the feminists, working class women give leadership in struggles that do challenge the sexism of the bosses' system. For example, the Communist Party of Peru ("Sendero Luminoso") attracts more women than men to its ranks and into the leadership of its guerrilla movement. "The idea that all existing governing structures must be destroyed in order to rebuild society from the grassroots up seems to have special appeal for women," as one observer put it. In books like *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo*, Elvia Alvarado and other Central American women explain how they came to be leaders in the campesinos' struggle against imperialism. In the U.S., one of the few militant and successful strikes in recent years was that of 700 workers, mostly black women, at the Delta Pride catfish processing plant in Indianola, Mississippi. Women are taking the lead in building the communist **PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY** from teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico to hospital workers in Chicago, Illinois, from garment and farm workers in California to students and the unemployed in Detroit, Michigan.

Women workers cannot free

themselves from oppression without taking the lead in the revolutionary communist movement to smash capitalism. The "New Democracy" called for by Sendero, the "free elections and democratic rights" sought by most "anti-imperialist" movements, the economic reforms and the minimum of respect won by the Delta Pride strikers.... none of these will abolish the roots of the special oppression of women workers. The main theme of this article, then, is that only under communism will the potential exist for full equality among women and men. And without a vigorous struggle against sexism it would be impossible to build communist society. To fight sexism, women and men must join and build the PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY.

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNIST LINE ON SEXISM

For nearly a century and a half, communists have struggled with the so-called "women question." This section will outline some of the major stages in this process. Of course, there is far more to be learned from the historical experiences of our movement, and we should write more on this in the future.

MARX, ENGELS, AND THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL

Much as was the case with Marx's analysis of racism, his ideas on sexism were relatively undeveloped even though his work provided a solid basis for a class analysis of the roots of women's oppression. Three points in Capital bear directly on the issue,

- First, consider women's work in the home. Most of this consists of the "reproduction of labor power": bearing and raising the next generation of workers, and feeding and caring for the present generation on a daily basis so that it can continue to work for the boss day after day. In Marx's words, "The labor-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labor power." As he put it elsewhere, "This reproduction of labor power forms, in fact, an essential of the reproduction of capital itself." So women's work in the home is an integral part of the capitalist system of production. Even though it is not itself wage labor, it produces the labor power to be sold for wages.

- Second, labor power is a commodity and its value is determined as are those of all other

commodities, by the amount of labor socially necessary for its production: i.e., the value of means of subsistence necessary to maintain the laborer. But, again quoting Marx, "Taking the working class as a whole, a portion of the means of subsistence is consumed by members of the family who either do not yet work or who have ceased to do so." So we can't really understand the value of labor power without taking into account the nature of the family.

A particular standard of living exists in every country which is the result of previous class struggles. The continuing struggle to maintain or improve these living standards involves such issues as: At what age are children forced to begin wage labor, and is there any age beyond which older workers are exempt? How much time can a woman spend working directly to fulfill her family's needs, and how much time is she forced to put into low-paying wage labor that takes her away from her family? As we will see later, this has been a point of sharp struggle.

- Marx pointed out that when more family members work for wages, the value of labor power is depreciated and the rate of exploitation increases. This is, of course, what the boss wants. Also, as commodity production spreads, more items must be

bought, instead of produced by domestic labor. As a result the increased total wages the family receives from women's labor doesn't increase the living standard. All that happens is an expansion of the market for commodity production. So in capitalism it is capital that benefits most from drawing women into the wage labor force, since the result is greater exploitation, not liberation.

This brings us to the third point. As capital grows, it demands more labor power, swelling the proletariat. But the drive for surplus value forces constant efforts to increase productivity, mostly through mechanization, therefore creating a "relative surplus population" of wage workers. This includes the "industrial reserve army" or workers without work; as Marx put it, "a mass of labor power... which cannot get free from capital."

Women constitute a block of labor reservists crucial to the class struggle precisely because of their dual status within the capitalist system of production. When the bosses no longer need their wage labor, women still have their "unproductive" and unpaid (but necessary and time-consuming) work at home. Intensified propaganda to the effect that "woman's place is in the home" exploits women's own desires not to drop from exhaus-

tion. Women are conflicted: they need the money they are losing by being laid off, but they are also glad to have more time for the work at home. This minimizes the fight-back that might be expected from mass layoffs and dismissals. Note that this would not work nearly as well for the bosses if men and women shared the work of the home equally.

Marx never drew these threads together into a systematic analysis of sexism in capitalist society. However, they are the best starting-point in communist theory for the development of such an analysis. Unfortunately, they have been overshadowed by Engels' sketch *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.

Engels' contribution was a significant historical materialist analysis of the position of women. Although he was not correct in every detail, more recent evidence from anthropology has confirmed his general position. However, Engels' analysis is; fundamentally flawed by a mechanical, rather than dialectical, understanding of materialism.

Engels effectively demolished the two sets of arguments then used by the bourgeoisie to defend the inequality of women: religious ideology adapted from

feudalism, and a newer ideology claiming to base itself on biology. What these two positions had in common was the idea that because women were (in a few respects) "made" different from men, they were inherently inferior to men and "had to" play a subordinate role in society. Mouthpieces for the ruling class supported this argument by trying to show that women had "always" been oppressed, according to the rule of god and/or "nature." Notice that these same arguments are heard today, in only slightly varying forms, from sociobiologists and religious fundamentalists. Engels countered-based on the work of the early anthropologist Morgan, and Marx's notes on Morgan — that the oppression of women arose with class society.

Despite some glaring weaknesses in Morgan's work, Engels' conclusion is supported by better and more recent studies of non-class societies. Among people such as the Iroquois as late as the 19th century, or the !Kung well into the twentieth century, men and women have been fundamentally equals in society even where specific tasks or rituals may be gender-specific. This suggests strongly that social inequalities between men and women are due to institutionalized sexism in class society, enforced by the state. Did class society.

have to develop sexism? That question is basically meaningless; the fact is that it did.

However, there are a number of problems with *The Origin of the Family*. Engels shows that the oppression of women arose alongside private property and the state, but he does not show how these developments were rooted in the social relations of production. He places far more emphasis on techniques of production, assuming (as in the “theory of the productive forces”) that relations of production flow automatically from a given level of material production. He follows Morgan in assuming that “innate” human greed and competitiveness play an independent causal role in history.

Engels draws the conclusion that “modern large-scale industry,” by pulling women into social production, was automatically working toward the equality of the sexes. As we have seen, life was soon to prove him wrong. He also followed the early *German Ideology* in describing the “biological” and the “social” spheres of human life as quite distinct. In this view, the division of labor within the family is seen both as “natural” and as the seed from which the social division of labor — and therefore class society — developed. This confuses his main point, and opens the door for analyses in which class

and sex oppression are seen as having fundamentally different roots.

When it came to practice, the socialists of the First International played a respectable role in the fight against sexism in the late nineteenth century insofar as they fought for “equal opportunity” for women workers on the job and in the class struggle. However, their line and practice were deeply economist and reformist. They incorrectly believed that capitalist development would eliminate sexism. They thought that the main aspect of sexism under capitalism was the exclusion of working-class women from participation in wage labor outside the home. They argued that economic “independence” (i.e., the opportunity to sell their labor power) would place women workers on an equal plane with men workers. This was the Left line in the terms of the 19th century debate on the “woman question.”

Right-wing feminists accepted the stereotype of woman as “domestic” but argued that women were therefore morally superior and/or had a special (different, limited) role to play in public life. Right-wing trade-unionists attacked women wage-laborers for “taking men’s jobs” and “cheapening the value of labor” (because bosses paid them

less and thereby drove down wages generally).

But the line of the First International was very limited nonetheless. It assumed that sexism was in contradiction to basic elements of capitalism and therefore could (and would) be defeated with the refinement of capitalism. That is: the First International saw the fight against sexism mainly as a bourgeois-democratic reform. They did not see how crucial sexism was to capitalist profits. They did not take into account that when women worked outside of home, they still ended up doing housework as well — and so, often, they were oppressed more, not less, by entrance into wage slavery.

THE PERIOD OF THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL

By the early 20th century it was clear to the theorists of the Second International that capitalism would not automatically end sexism; that would take a political struggle for socialism. But the anti-sexist struggle (like other aspects of the work of the Second International) was undermined by its ideology and its opportunist emphasis on electoral politics and reformist trade union work.

August Bebel's massive 1879 book *Woman and Socialism* set the

theoretical terms of the socialist debate on the question for this period. It had tremendous influence largely because it was one of the very few works that attempted to set forward a detailed vision of what socialism would be like. As such, it also demonstrated the commitment of German social democracy — then the bastion of the movement — to organizing among women. Bebel denounced the specific oppression of women under capitalist society, holding this up as a powerful example of why workers (especially, but not exclusively women workers) need socialism.

But where **Engels** merely confused the issue of whether the oppression of women was rooted firmly in class society or in an independent historical development of the family, Bebel thoroughly muddled it with his commitment to the right-wing position. He based himself on the “two spheres” argument, identifying the relations within the family—particularly women's dependence on **men**—as the root of sexist oppression. He saw the issue of women's liberation mainly as a struggle for individual independence. (Some “socialist-feminist” theorists of the late twentieth century would later pick up this rightwing Social-Democratic ideology enthusiastically.)

Bebel recognized that the legal equality demanded by bourgeois feminists was not enough; economic equality was also needed. And he insisted that only "socialism" would (in the distant future) solve the problem. But Bebel's "socialism," like that of Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward*, was based on a petit-bourgeois vision of a society in which everyone would be "free and independent equals," rather than interdependent members of an egalitarian collective. So he was not able, in the end, to analyze the so-called

"woman question" in a way substantially different from liberal feminism. And he implied that women would have to struggle against sexism virtually without the help of men of their class.

Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling's pamphlet *The Woman Question* continued in the same vein of identifying the "social struggle" (against capitalism) and the struggle for women's equality as parallel movements, not as aspects of the same movement. Nor did they make much progress toward bridging the



Clara Zetkin (left) with Frederick **Engels** at her side and August **Bebel** during the International Socialist Workers' Conference, Zurich, **1893**

gap between utopian visions of a distant egalitarian future, and “practical” short-range struggles for political rights under capitalism.

What about socialist practice? Women counted for about 16% of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the early twentieth century—a higher percentage than anywhere else. The SPD’s consistent fight for women’s suffrage and for laws against overt sexist discrimination, although thoroughly reformist, had built a basis for a large socialist women’s movement. Within this movement, Clara Zetkin was the main theoretical voice against the SPD’s reformist position; she eventually sided with Lenin and the Bolsheviks when the Second International split, and became an enthusiastic supporter of the Soviet Union.

From 1896 on, Zetkin took the important step of breaking down the “woman question” on the basis of social class: sexism meant quite different things for bourgeois women than it did for women of the working class. Unlike bourgeois women, she noted, proletarian women were already part of social production, victims of capitalist super-exploitation. The oppression of women was not eternal, as Bebel had suggested, but (as Engels had said) grounded in particular historical

developments.

Based on her class analysis of sexism, Zetkin concluded that the main aspect of socialist work on the “woman question” had to be socialist organizing among working women. Her main emphasis was on organizing women on the job, but she recognized that many (if not most) women worked in situations that made this difficult (for example, as servants in private households, piece-work laborers in domestic production, or in small-scale agriculture). So she also called for work among women in their neighborhoods.

At least in later years, she struggled against the tendency among SPD women to make issues of marriage, love and sexuality the main topic of discussion in women’s study circles.

But Zetkin sometimes romanticized the position of women within the family, in the pre-capitalist epoch and within the working class of her own day. She paid little serious attention to the “double shift” of women workers — apart from the practical difficulties it created in winning them to be politically active — and less still to the proletarian woman who did not work outside the home. In effect, she one-sidedly downplayed the particularities of the oppression of working class women, assuming

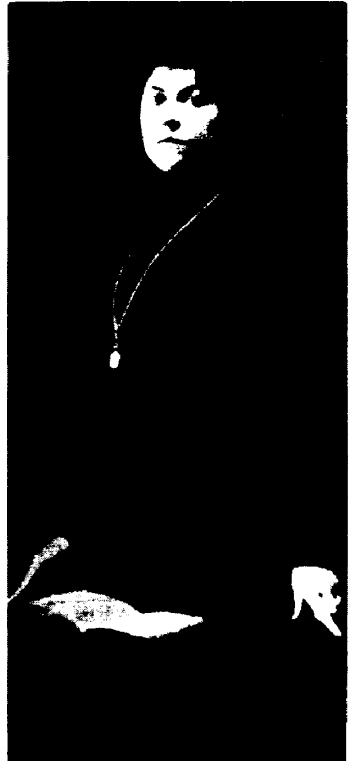
that a general analysis of capitalism alone would provide the answers.

Like Zetkin, the Russian socialist Alexandra Kollontai fought for a class line on sexism. Her book *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909) carried out the left-wing socialist struggle against revisionism in the context of the debate over the oppression of women. Its main theme was an attack on bourgeois feminism, which had begun to make some headway among women of the working class. It emphasized that feminism fought for "equal rights" only within the framework of capitalist oppression; it offered nothing to the proletarian woman. The woman worker "is her own saviour; her future is in her own hands." The socialist movement would be the vehicle for this struggle.

But Kollontai made more of an effort than Zetkin to use Marxism to analyze the special oppression of women. "For women, the solution of the family question is no less important than the achievement of political equality and economic independence." This question, too, had a class character. For bourgeois women, the answer lay in "isolated, heroic efforts of individuals": defiance of family and convention in the pursuit of "free love." For proletarian

women, in contrast, "the question of relationships would cease to be such a painful one ... only if society relieved women of all those petty household cares which are at present unavoidable (given the existence of individual, scattered domestic economies)" and socialized child care.

Unlike bourgeois social reformers who tried to dream up



Alexandra Kollontai in 1910

new forms of the family and of marital relations out of their own imaginations, the proletarian women were “waging war against the factors that are behind the modern form of marriage and family. In striving to change fundamentally the conditions of life,” she continued, “they are also helping to reform relationships between the sexes.”

To accomplish this, human psychology would have to change dramatically, overcoming “that deeply rooted sense of property that demands possession not only of the body but also of the soul of another.” The “life of the collective” would have to replace “the individual’s petty personal joys.” Abolition of the existing social system was a prerequisite to this sort of transformation, which Kollontai recognized would also require conscious ideological struggle.

Kollontai was a vigorous and principled fighter for socialism throughout the 1910s, joining the Bolsheviks in 1915 and soon becoming the only woman comrade on the Central Committee. She was thus able to try to put some of these ideas into practice.

WOMEN IN SOVIET RUSSIA

Just a year after the Bolshevik Revolution, the busy Lenin made

a surprise appearance at the First AU-Russia Congress of Working Women. “The experience of all liberation movements has shown that the success of a revolution depends on how much the woman takes part in it,” he told these comrades of “the women’s section of the workers’ army.”

He pointed with pride to the fact that “for the first time in history, our law has removed everything that denied women rights.” These legal reforms made divorce readily available, eliminated distinctions between babies born in and out of marriage, permitted abortion, gave women political rights (such as the vote), and generally endorsed the concept of “equal pay for equal work.”

But more important to Lenin was the struggle against customs (backed by religion) that still kept many women enslaved. And women would only be “completely emancipated” when small peasant farms had been replaced by “cooperative farming” using “collective methods.” While Lenin did not explain this in detail, he was clearly indicating that the roots of women’s oppression were in the economic system based on private property — and not, as the rightwing Social Democrats believed, in an autonomous “family.”

Eight months later, Lenin was

emphasizing the need for far more sweeping changes in the social relations of production. "Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave," he wrote, "because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies, and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and nursery. ... The real emancipation of women," he continued, "real communism, will begin only where and when an all out struggle begins (led by the proletariat wielding the state power) against this petty housekeeping, or rather when its wholesale transformation into a large-scale socialist economy begins." In practical terms, it was necessary to "take proper care of the shoots of **communism**" represented by creches (public nurseries), kindergartens, stolovye (public dining rooms) and so forth.

This formulation of the problem was very significant. It recognized that the special oppression of women within the home was not simply (or even mainly) a question of male domination. The Bolsheviks had taken seriously the famous (if perhaps misleading) slogan, "within the family, he is the bourgeoisie, she is the proletariat." They had attempted to smash the family equivalent of state power with the laws and ideological campaigns around

freedom of divorce, marriage, and childbearing. Now Lenin could see that these measures, while necessary, had not cut to the root of the problem. He explicitly recognized that the liberation of women from special oppression depended fundamentally on the reorganization of production on a thoroughly social basis.

In this speech, Lenin was promoting exactly the program of Alexandra Kollontai, who was, as the first communist Minister of Social Welfare, responsible for these and other activities. Between 1918 and 1920 the Soviet women's bureau (Zhenotdel) became increasingly active, under the direction first of **Inessa Armand** and later of Kollontai. Leaders like Lenin and Sverdlov supported it, but there was considerable resistance among many of the Bolshevik men, some of whom ridiculed it and called for its abolition; the **ideological** struggle in the party against sexism was clearly at a low level.

At first Zhenotdel concentrated on winning women workers to support Soviet power and to help in the civil war and in socialist construction. Most of its work was educational, although it did play the key role in formulating the decree that legalized abortion in 1920. Kollontai tried to expand its role to work for **pro-**

grams specifically aimed at improving the position of women. Every one of these — from the organization of peasant women to a campaign to fight prostitution with job training to calls for efforts to win more women into leadership positions — met with stubborn resistance within the party and its leading bodies, as well as among the masses. The fight against sexism demanded an intensified political struggle over the line of the movement. Socialism was not automatically making women and men equal.

However, the end of the period of “war communism” and the start of the New Economic Policy marked a major setback. Kollontai became part of the “Workers’ Opposition” to NEP, arguing that promotion of capitalist relations of production — even under communist supervision — was an unprincipled and unwarranted compromise with the class enemy. (Her practical alternative to NEP, increased power for independent trade unions at the expense of the party-dominated state apparatus, was no solution either; but that is another story.)

Kollontai turned to fiction to dramatize the bad effects that NEP would have, especially on women workers. In the story *Soon* (*In 48 Years’ Time*) she envisions a scene in 1970 in which the children of “Commune Ten” are asking veterans of the revolu-

tion about the old days. (“We saw money in a museum. Did you have money, grand-dad?” one asks.) The sketch is a brief but appealing description of the communist world that Kollontai believed (or at least hoped) could be realized within the lifetime of many of her readers.

Kollontai wrote fairly extensively on the future of the family and relations between the sexes under socialism and communism. She recognized that the transformation of housework and childrearing into social functions was already abolishing the family as an economic unit: “The family is withering away not because it is being forcibly destroyed by the state but because the family is ceasing to be a necessity . . . In place of the old relationship between men and women, a new one is developing: a union of affection and comradeship, a union of two equal members of communist society. . . . In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades.”

Kollontai’s views on these questions were not taken seriously by her own comrades. For those who did not see clearly the connections between economic organization of society and the ideology it sustains and which

sustains it, or did not grasp the place of the family within the social relations of production, her concerns seemed frivolous. For those (and they were many) with only the most superficial grasp of sexism, her ideas seemed outlandish and even dangerous. Her opposition to NEP and her involvement with the "Workers' Opposition" in the early 1920s helped to isolate her from Party leadership.

And as Soviet socialism became increasingly bogged down in nationalism, the "theory of the productive forces," and other capitalist elements, progress toward equality of the sexes also slowed down and eventually was reversed. Kollontai had long ago realized that fruitful speculation about the future had to be based on actual experience of the working class transforming the world; she no longer saw around her the basis for further speculation. And she did not have enough confidence in her ability as a theorist to attempt to formulate a thoroughgoing critique.

Nonetheless, the dictatorship of the proletariat did enable Soviet women to win freedoms which feudal and capitalist dictatorships had always denied them. In fact it was only the dictatorship of the proletariat that allowed the Second International's dream that women, like men, should be "free and in-

dependent equals" to be realized to **such a great extent — even though the Second International had opposed the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only the dictatorship of the proletariat could realize the dreams of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois feminists for "free love" and political equality—even though the bourgeois feminists had bitterly opposed the dictatorship of the proletariat.**

Peasant women, Muslim women, those who had been chained by the traditions of feudalism, broke those chains in a few short years. Women of Uzbekistan, mobilized by red women organizers, got up off the floor and burned their veils. They, and women workers, quickly found job and educational opportunities that few had ever dreamed of. They came forward by the thousands to take leadership in building a society in which women achieved greater equality with men than had ever existed anywhere in the capitalist world. These accomplishments must be remembered and celebrated. They are an inspiration to us all.

But just as socialism did not lead to egalitarian communism, neither could it abolish sexism. In the name of socialism, Soviet factories in the 1920s churned out cosmetics so that every peasant girl would be as privileged as

a western lady — reinforcing bourgeois stereotypes and expectations of womanhood, rather than challenging them. In the name of nationalism, the “motherhood” campaign of the 1930s drove abortion underground again and offered monetary bonuses to women bearing more than six children — and even greater ones to those with more than ten children. As socialism was built, step by step, Soviet women found themselves once again trapped in the dual role of wage worker and unpaid homemaker. The sexism of bourgeois society was reproduced along with the other capitalist social relations that characterize socialism.

WOMEN AND THE GPCR

One strength of the Communist Party of China was that, from the start, it organized women workers, intellectuals, and especially peasants, on a mass basis. Women in the Liberated Areas were no longer chattel, but comrades and leaders. Women, equally with men, received land of their own in the great land-reform distributions. No more girls had their feet deliberately crippled. The widespread practice of female infanticide was suppressed. Collective struggle was encouraged, and backed by state power, against the oppression of women by male relatives.

Most significantly, however, the People’s Commune movement of 1958 began fundamental changes in relations of production and distribution that had a huge potential for carrying through the anti-sexist struggle. As many women told the communist reporter Anna Louise Strong in 1959, “With Liberation we received legal and political equality, but only this past year did we attain real equality with the coming of the commune.”

Wages for work in the commune were paid directly to the woman worker, not into the hands of her in-laws as had been the case even in the cooperative farms. Girls and women were allowed and even encouraged to learn jobs once reserved for males. More important, a huge network of child-care institutions and communal dining facilities allowed women to work on close to the same basis as men. Equal pay thus went beyond a legal formalism to become more nearly a reality. And women reported that relations between husbands and wives were better now that the most common sources of friction had been removed. “Since I don’t have to cook anymore, Fan and I go to meetings and study together,” explained one young mother.

Finally and most crucially, the People’s Communes began to

implement distribution according to need instead of according to work. The most common "free things" **were** food, maternity care, nurseries, kindergartens, schools, and housing for the elderly. Even more than "equal pay," this worked to equalize the positions of women and men. For example, a woman in advanced pregnancy could not hope to produce as much as a healthy young man; under even the fairest wage system, women had to choose between childbearing and maximizing her economic security. Under the communist "supply system," she did not.

The Party, already dominated by right-wingers, quickly began to limit the Commune movement. "Wages must take first place," according to a party decree in December 1958, and must "increase faster than the system of free supply." The class struggle sharpened: between those who wanted to move more rapidly to communism and those who wanted to maintain capitalist relations in the name of "socialism." Later the defeat of the Left in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the sharp turn back toward capitalism, marked a major setback for anti-sexism and soon reversed much of the progress that had been made. No more "free things" but instead reliance on

wages; no promotion of communal effort, but instead reliance on profitability. Women especially quickly lost ground.

The effects of this reversal went further. For example, China had successfully limited excessive population growth during the 1950s, in spite of phenomenal improvements in life expectancy, by means of education and political struggle. By the 1970s, the government's approach had to change: now it tried to control the birth rate by legal limitations on family size, enforced with economic penalties. Since many families still value boys more highly than girls (an idea reinforced by the institutional sexism in Chinese society) female infanticide has again become common. Another example suggests the intimate links between sexism, racism, and capitalism: Western-style "beauty" contests are now promoting the view of women as commodities, not comrades. The "**most** beautiful" are judged to be those with the most European features.

The working women and men of China will not permit this desecration to endure. A commune member in Shantung wrote in 1958, "We fear nor heaven nor earth/For a thousand families/Have become one family." We have much to learn from the Chinese revolution as well as

from its mistakes.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LINE OF THE PLP

In February, 1971, PL Magazine (Vol. 8, #1) published "The Political Economy of Male Chauvinism" in response to the rise of a bourgeois feminist movement in the United States. While the feminists concentrated on psychological aspects of sexism, the PL article discussed in detail the ways that male-chauvinist ideology is used by the capitalists to justify the exploitation of women workers. It attacked the feminist analysis of "the nuclear family" as the supposed basis of sexist oppression. It proposed instead (a) fighting sexism on the job, the "economic profit base of male chauvinism"; and (b) struggling for anti-sexism and collectivity around housework, childrearing, etc. in family and neighborhood contexts.

This piece concluded that sexism could only be abolished after a long struggle under socialism, but it was framed and argued in a thoroughly reformist way. Also, it said almost nothing either about the actual work of the Party or about the particular role the Party should play in the light against sexism.

In 1980 the PLP published a pamphlet, "Smash Sexism in

Garment" (also in PL Magazine, Vol. 13, #4). This was important because it represented a serious (and almost isolated) effort to integrate the fight against sexism into a general communist program. It correctly focused on women as workers, rather than women's reproductive lives (as most feminists were then doing). Perhaps its greatest strength was that it drew on experiences of comrades who were organizing among women workers. It contains a great deal of useful information and analysis, and should be read by comrades and friends today.

The piece tried to analyze both the oppression of women within the home and the exploitation of women's labor in capitalist production, but did not do so successfully. For example, it makes a false distinction between fighting "sexism in practice" (meaning on-the-job) and "sexist ideology" (including the organization of unpaid work in the household). This is wrong on several counts. First, when women workers come home from their paid jobs to hours more of housework and child care, this is as much sexism "in practice" as is the smaller paycheck they received from the boss. Second, to separate the fight against sexist ideology from on-the-job struggles is an economist (or reformist) error.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

One strength of the work of PLP in fighting sexism has been our relative success in developing women workers as party leaders. This has been due in part to the recognition that the working class needs such leaders, but more to the profound reformulation of the concept of leadership that we have helped to bring to the communist movement.

All too often in the past, leadership was seen in a formalistic way that reflected reformist and opportunist errors. "Leaders" were people who gave public speeches, wrote theoretical documents, held official positions in unions or political parties, directed strike tactics, commanded armies. They were the "few" leading the "many". Some were women, but most were men.

But from a communist point of view, leaders of the working class are those who take on themselves the responsibility of advancing the class struggle. This is shown mainly by winning those around them to a deeper ideological understanding of capitalism and communism, and to action based on that understanding. For example, a woman worker with strong ties to her co-workers,

who sells *Challenge* to them and struggles with them over the Party's ideas but who has little experience in physical conflict and hesitates to speak over a bullhorn, is much more of a leader than, say, a man worker who will give speeches and is willing to lead the charge against a fascist rally but who will not build a political base. The working class needs many, many leaders — not just a few. In the future, as we build communist society, all workers will become leaders.

The main way that sexism has held back the development of communist leadership is not that sexism has created objective and subjective obstacles to women taking on specific traditionally "male" responsibilities. It has certainly done this, and these obstacles can and must be overcome. But the more significant impact of sexism has **been** that crucial tasks of communist leadership (such as getting to know people individually and well, and taking responsibility for their development) have been stereotyped as "female" and thereby devalued, just as "women's work" in the home is devalued in capitalist terms.

Because of this new understanding of leadership, the PLP has been able to recognize the crucial leadership that women give today and most likely gave in the past (without

acknowledgement). It is wrong to say that women have historically been "passive" in the class struggle, even relative to men. This is as much of a lie as the bosses' stereotypes of workers as "stupid" or black people as "lazy." The sharper we are on this question, the better we will be able to build the confidence in themselves than women **need** in order to overcome subjective obstacles to doing the political tasks traditionally identified as "male." This, in turn, will help our women comrades and friends to confront the sexism they encounter in relationships with male family members, friends, and comrades.

ONLY COMMUNISM CAN SMASH SEXISM

The PLP "Smash Sexism" pamphlet could not provide a satisfactory analysis of sexism because the PLP was still following the mistaken general line of "fight for socialism." Socialism, even in the best of circumstances, maintains wage labor. It is therefore incapable of ending sexism.

Soviet communist leaders like Lenin and especially Kollontai came close to grasping this point, but failed to see its significance. When Lenin referred to "the emancipation of women, real communism" in 1919, he correctly recognized that the two are inseparable — but soon con-

cluded that both would have to wait, as "war communism" was set aside for the NEP. Kollontai correctly disagreed with this policy, but could offer nothing more concrete than a vague call for a "forced advance to communism" in its place. The line of the PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY offers for the first time in history a program for "the emancipation of women, real communism" immediately following the seizure of power by the working class.

Under communism, the fruits of labor outside the home will not be alienated from the working class by a parasitic elite. The working class as a whole will share what the working class produces. Men and women will share all tasks inside and outside the home. And the distinction between "home" and "society" will be abolished as communist society makes it the responsibility of all to provide as best we can for all our members. "We" will come to mean, not "Mr. and Mrs. Gomez and their biological offspring," or even "all us Johnsons," but "we the international working class."

The remaining pages of this article will develop these ideas in more detail.

THE NATURE OF SEXISM IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

How is capitalism organized around the **inequality of** men and women? To put this in another way, what is the contradiction that defines sexism in capitalist society? It is the contradiction of women workers' dual role in the system of production as bornemakers, on one hand, and wage laborers, on the other.

One aspect of this contradiction is that women are expected to shoulder the lioness's share of the labor involved in reproducing the labor force. That is, they are the primary producers of labor power. In working class families, this is not wage labor but production for individual consumption within the home. Here, women workers appear primarily as "women" and their work is portrayed as a "natural" extension of the biological functions of childbearing and lactation.

The other aspect of this contradiction is that these same women form a steadily increasing part of the wage labor force and an even larger portion of the "reserve army of the unemployed" that also continues to grow as capitalism advances deeper and deeper into crisis. Here women workers appear primarily as "workers" engaged,

like other workers, in commodity production.

Why are these two aspects of woman's place in capitalism contradictory and not complementary? To put it another way, why does "woman" stand in opposition to "worker"? Simply put, because under capitalism, commodity production stands in opposition to production for use.

Which is the main aspect of the contradiction? In capitalism, women's oppression within the family is a structural part of the capitalist system. That system's main contradiction, however, is between employer and wage-worker. Therefore, women workers' participation in wage labor is the main aspect of the contradiction defining sexism under capitalism. Their role in the household portion of the economy is the secondary aspect.

Wage labor under capitalism is "alienated" labor. This does not just mean that it is organized to be boring or that most of what is produced is garbage. Rather, it means specifically that the products of the workers' labor are "alienated" or owned not by them, but by the capitalists for whom they work. Workers do not work for themselves as a class, but for the bosses as a class.

Work in the home for one's family is not wage labor, and the

capitalists generally do not own the product of this work, which is labor power itself. This labor power remains (literally) in the hands of the working class but it use useless to the workers (who lack tools, machines, raw materials, and other means of production) until they can sell it to some capitalist. The capitalist then owns the labor power and all it produces. So domestic labor for one's own family is not alienated labor.

How women experience this contradiction depends largely on their class. Historically and in the present, the women most eager to work outside of the home have been those (1) whose class background gave them a shot at non-proletarian (and therefore non-alienated) work, such as the private practice of medicine; and (2) who generally hired other women (mainly, in the U.S., black women) to do the domestic work of their household anyway-and had to cope with the results of the alienation of these workers. In the U.S., for example, white petit-bourgeois women have struggled to spend more time in outside work, while mouthpieces of the bourgeoisie have done their best to get them to go home and make more white babies.

The situation is different for the working class woman. In some ways she would often prefer to

“do” for her own family than to work for some boss. A black Kentucky woman explained described how domestic workers in her neighborhood held “day-off-get-togethers” every Thursday. “That was hard work, but people didn’t mind because they wanted to do that and they were working for themselves. Now, they didn’t work any harder for the white woman. As a matter of fact, they didn’t work as hard for white people as they did for themselves.” Wage labor — alienating in a psychological as well as in an economic sense — could easily be seen, even by women themselves, as a distraction from “their” work in the home — which had to be done in any case. Yet a woman who did not earn wages might easily find herself uncomfortably dependent on a man. If he abused her, or pursued other women, she would have little recourse. Either situation was especially acute if the woman had young children.

Women workers as individuals often had little choice as to how they would resolve the contradiction of sexism in their own lives. As earlier examples have shown, they might be prohibited by their father, husband, or brother, or by law itself, from taking a job. A boss might refuse to hire them, or a union official might deny them membership necessary to work in a closed shop.

On the other hand, economic necessity or even physical brutality might force them into (low)-paying work.

For example, a black migrant to Chicago around 1916 reported that in his native Mississippi, "a woman was not permitted to remain at home if she felt like it. If she was found at home some of the white people would come to ask why she was not in the field and tell her she had to get to the field or else abide by the consequences. After the summer crops were all in, any of the white people could send for any Negro woman to come and do the family washing at 75 cents to \$1.00 a day."

Therefore the question of how to resolve the contradictions of sexism has always been, for the woman worker if not for the bourgeois lady, mainly dependent on collective struggle. Two strategies have already been mentioned. The first was to draw women fully into the wage labor force, hoping in this way to negate their special oppression within the family. The second was to withdraw women fully from the wage labor force, hoping in this way to eliminate the double burden they shouldered. Both solutions were mechanical; both were essentially geared toward reform within capitalism; as we have seen, neither worked.

But the failures of these strategies were not merely tactical; they were political as well. The first downplayed or even denied the need for a conscious struggle against sexism. The second, accepting as "given" a profound division of labor within the working class, inadvertently planted and replanted the seeds of inequality and therefore disunity. Where there is no equality of the sexes within the family, women feel that "their" work is alienating, even if no capitalist is actually profiting from it. They see only their husbands as their oppressors. At the same time, by accepting and perpetuating the idea that each wage-earner ought ideally to take individual responsibility for his household, workers reinforce both the ideology of individualism and the structure of modern capitalism.

Two other strategies for fighting sexism can be rejected quickly. Some "socialist-feminists" have called for the government to pay "wages for housework" to resolve the contradiction between (male) wage work outside the home and (female) unpaid work in the home. This is ridiculous. Wages are the price of labor power; once bought, that labor power belongs to the buyer. What working class woman would want government officials dictat-

ing how she should spend her time on housework? All these "socialist-feminists" are really asking for is a government hand-out, on the order of an extra tax deduction — hardly a radical demand.

Others, including some of our comrades, think the answer to sexism is for husbands and wives to share housework equally. Of course they should share housework, but that's no strategy to smash sexism. It doesn't speak at all to the problems of single women (with or without children). And it doesn't address the essence of **sexism** in capitalist society.

How, then, can women workers free themselves from wage slavery, if not by withdrawing from the labor market? Only by destroying capitalism itself, including every remnant of the wage system.

WOMEN IN COMMUNIST SOCIETY

Since sexism is fundamentally an aspect of capitalist society, the abolition of capitalist economic relations (in both the "public" and the "private" spheres) will abolish sexism as it now exists. But that is not as simple as it sounds, because an important part of destroying capitalist relations will be to identify and eliminate all specific ways

around which work is organized on the basis of sexual inequality. As with **the** eradication of racism, this takes an intense political struggle to win masses of women and men workers to carry out anti-sexist work.

This struggle has already begun within our movement and among workers with whom our Party has influence. But after the revolution, commanding all the resources of the workers' state, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, we will be able to wage this fight on a far, far, far, broader scale. It will be a qualitatively different situation: state power is the weapon we need to win the struggle against sexism. The experiences of the Soviet and Chinese communists, however limited, provide a glimpse of how this will work.

The main task of the proletarian state will be the immediate abolition of wage labor and the market economy. Distribution will be based on need. Women will **not be** dependent on men for economic survival, whether or not they have small children, whatever their skills. Nor will women be impoverished as single heads of households. No woman will have to seek or to avoid a pregnancy in order to secure her economic position or that of her other children. No woman (or man) will be forced into prostitution — nor into

marriage.

Because women have so far borne most of the responsibility for homemaking and childcare, women workers will have the skills necessary to organize the transformation of these tasks into social functions.

Contrary to the practice of both the Soviets and the Chinese, this does not mean that women (virtually alone) will continue to perform these tasks in new settings. Rather, women comrades will take the lead in winning both men and women workers to learn to do things together — running nurseries, public laundries, heavy cleaning services, dining halls, etc. — in the new way. Most people will do more than one kind of work, and both women and men will be encouraged to learn skills traditionally reserved for the other sex.

Past experience, variations in strength, dexterity, etc. among the workers will not result in differential standards of living.

Ending commodity production (the market) will help to undermine bourgeois values and attitudes. We will learn to see other people (including members of the opposite sex) as comrades, not as vendors of sexual and/or emotional services, not as commodities to be “shopped” for or “sold” for a dowry. We will learn to value our work

and that of others not for its market price (“a good salary”) but as a contribution to the collective good. Gone, for example, will be the invidious distinction between “housework” and “real work.”

Changing social relations of production will not automatically eliminate sexist ideology or attitudes; in the future, as now, there will have to be a political struggle to win the mass of men and women workers to a communist understanding of sexism and to the goal of an egalitarian society. This is a key part of the central task of the party: winning the working class to fight for communism. We will continue to pay special attention to the development of women workers as comrades and leaders in all areas of the work of the party.

We will use movies, music, art, literature, and all other forms of cultural expression, as well as newspapers, meetings, and other formal political activities, to fight sexist ideas and stereotypes and to win the working class (and especially the youth) to an egalitarian communist commitment to equality of the sexes. We will struggle against and suppress anti-woman “entertainment,” just as we will suppress racism. Violent sexist attacks will decline as men of the working class join with women to fight the real enemy, capitalism, and as an egalitarian way of life engenders

comradeship and self-respect.

But when they do occur they will not be tolerated: rape, wife abuse, and sexual harassment will not be treated as subjects for jokes but as attacks on the unity of the working class. Anti-working class violence — including violent sexist attacks — will be met with the organized violence of the proletarian state.

We do not know how long it will be, how many years or how many generations, until sexist ideology will seem as quaintly and profoundly wrong as the flat-earth theory, and sexism itself as appallingly and unimaginably wrong as, say, cannibalism. We do know that attitudes can change surprisingly fast when women and men workers are united in struggle against the oppressors—and especially when they hold the vital weapon of state power. Communism can be won. The fight against sexism can be won. It will be **won**—however long it takes.

THE PROGRAM OF THE PLP

- Fight for communism as the

only basis for destroying sexism.

- **Build** a base among men and women workers around this line; struggle against male chauvinist ideology and sexist practices among **Party** members and our friends.

- **Put** special emphasis on organizing among women; continue the struggle to develop women, especially women workers oppressed by racism, in leadership.

- **Think** and write about **ways in which sexism affects the workers** in our base, and how we are trying to fight it; make sure that all our literature reflects **our line on fighting sexism.**

- *Get involved in struggles against specific sexist attacks and practices, on the job, in the communities, and in the schools.

- *Bring a communist line on fighting sexism into groups and organizations we are working **in: for** example, unions, anti-imperialist formations, anti-sexist **or-**ganizations, community groups.

By W.