

BIG FLAME women's group



FIGHTING FOR FEMINISM

The 'Women Question' in an Italian Revolutionary Group



NOTICE: This Material May Be Protected By Copyright Law. (Title 17 U.S. Code)

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
LETTERS	5
ARTICLE BY A. SOFRI	10
ACCOUNTS OF LOCAL MEETINGS. .	15
READING LIST	19

In Big Flame we emphasize local organising with working-class people rather than simply working inside the trade unions or the Labour Party. Our work with women includes involvement in the National Abortion Campaign, women's aid, housing, women's centres, childcare, factories and hospitals.

Our aim is to build the strength of working-class people first of all. We wish to work with anyone who is doing similar political work or is interested in working the way we do.

Our work is co-ordinated nationally by commissions - the Women's Commission, the Public Sector Commission, the Ireland Commission etc. - which are open to all Big Flame militants to take part in. They are flexible and decide how the political work in the area they cover should develop. The commissions feed information and ideas into the National Committee which tries to get an overview of the class struggle. The National Committee is entirely democratic and is made up of delegates chosen by their local groups.

In the present crisis it's clear that women have an even heavier burden of work forced upon them. But we can see in struggles all over the country that women are standing up for themselves. Our strategy is often different according to the needs of different areas but the need for women militants to help build the struggles of working-class women at home and in waged work has never been clearer.

We support all women militants who are trying to develop the struggle and of course hope they will consider joining a revolutionary organisation like Big Flame.

Produced by Big Flame Women's Commission
with help in translation and typing from
Jan O'Malley.

This pamphlet is about women working as militants in a revolutionary organisation. It centres around the events of a particular women's demonstration on abortion and the debate and political battle which resulted.

BACKGROUND

Since Lotta Continua was formed as a revolutionary group in 1969 there have been women in it. At that time there was no analysis of women struggling AS WOMEN and no attempt was being made to organise specifically with women. This was because of the nature of the class struggle in Italy in the late 60's - immigrant workers from southern Italy organising against the low pay and terrible conditions they suffered in the big northern factories like Fiat and the rise of the student movement against the false values of bourgeois society and their preparation for 'professional' jobs which just didn't exist. Lotta Continua has always said that revolutionaries must work with the MASS VANGUARDS at any particular moment in the class struggle and in fact it was born out of the massive vanguard struggles of these two movements - the factory workers and the university students.

So... women militants worked alongside men at the factory gates and in the student struggles - discussing, typing, duplicating, going to meetings, leafletting, flyposting, silkscreening, marching and battling with police and on the whole speaking up a lot less than men.

Around 1971 Lotta Continua (LC) got very involved in big community struggles which erupted in the northern cities in the slums where the factory workers from the south lived with their families. There were housing occupations, rent strikes, marches and occupation of local authority offices. Although working-class women were often in the forefront of these struggles there was still no analysis of women in community struggles as a vanguard. The vanguard was still seen as their men who worked and organised in the factories. The women were organised in these struggles around material conditions but there was no consistent discussion of their needs as women (although baby-sitting, resistant husbands, housework etc. were acknowledged as hindrances to the participation of women in these struggles).

INFLUENCE OF FEMINISM

The women's movement in Italy began to rise up in 1972 after the publication of Mariarosa Dalla Costa's pamphlet "Women and the Subversion of the Community". Women in the universities in the students movement and women who were beginning to drop out of the male-dominated left groups formed the first feminist organisations like Lotta Femminista (which became a Wages for Housework group and is now disbanded).

Many women remained in the left groups like LC and many more kept on joining because they agreed with LC's way of working, with their analysis of the class struggle and the need to build working-class power. But these women too were effected by the debates in the growing women's movement and some began demanding more space in LC to organise specifically with women and to develop their own analysis of women's struggles. This fragmented and uneven push by some women in LC came to a head during the period leading up to the Divorce Referendum in 1974.

On their own initiative women comrades in LC formed women's groups to try and mobilise Italian women to vote in favour of retaining the liberalised divorce laws and against the programme of the Cristian Democratic Party (the conservatives) then in power. The whole of LC realised the importance of women's role in this campaign and the importance of making it clear to working-class people that a vote in favour of divorce was a declaration against the government's programme of cuts in living standards, rising prices etc.

WOMEN'S COMMISSIONS

At that point women in LC gained the power to set up the first structures for co-ordinating work with women - the Women's Commissions. The Women's Commissions had the responsibility of developing an analysis of women's struggles, pushing forward the debate in LC about women - the family, sexuality, health etc. This was a heavy work load for the women in LC who took it on in a determined effort to make the entire organisation recognise and take seriously the importance of women organising as women.

This task didn't unite all the women in LC. Women number the majority of rank-and-file militants in LC although they have always been few in leadership positions. Many women never felt confident enough to enter into such a big debate and kept on with their day-to-day activity (which leaves little time and energy for much else anyway!). Just coming to grips with the contents of the newspaper, the political education and the ongoing discussion with people they were working with was a hard enough struggle.

But also, some women who had forged a certain position of strength and respect in the organisation over their years of good political work opposed this "feminist" debate and resisted the attempts by the Women's Commissions to bring all women together to discuss women's issues.

WOMEN AND THE PARTY

So there were many contradictions in LC over the 'question of women' and in January 1975 when LC declared itself to be a party there was in fact no basic thesis on women published. Instead there was a pledge to work towards the day when women would make up half of all positions of leadership and responsibility.

Deciding to become a party was the result of long years of developing the analysis of the class struggle and the organisations of the working-class and revolutionary vanguards. It was a decision to take more responsibility for the development of the struggle to win over the majority of the proletariat to the fight for a communist society. It meant in practical terms, setting out LC's basic theory and principles clearly making more formalised structures and laying down a constitution. The fact that no specific theory and structures (other than the Women's Commissions as formed by the women) dealing with women came out of their founding congress was simply a recognition that this was a vast area where the work of the organisation was only beginning and which needed space and flexibility to flourish.

WORK OVER THE PAST YEAR

All the Women's Commissions of the various cities and towns have been involved in the Abortion Campaign in Italy over this past year, fighting for a liberalised law on abortion. In practice the women comrades have often found it difficult to link the discussions about wages and hours of workers to the discussions about family and sexuality of women. They have been burdened with the responsibility of working out the perspective and activity for all comrades with regard to the Abortion Campaign which has hampered their own direct involvement in the campaign at times. But despite this their work in the students movement with women students began from the Abortion Campaign. The Abortion Campaign activity also led to their involvement in the women's neighbourhood health centres, enabled them to create good working relationships with women from other left groups and feminist organisations. All of this has broadened their experience.

Women in LC have been active in the organisations of women students (mainly from technical colleges and secondary schools) around their specific problems as women students (pushed into secretarial college and teachers' training courses) and the more general problems of students (the restructuring of education, lack of classrooms, unemployment, exams and streaming etc) and as women (abortion, sexuality, contraception, the family, life-style etc.).

They have been active in community struggles for more public housing, more nurseries and creches, the autoriduzione campaign (organising against paying gas, electricity and phone bills and mobilising against cut-offs), in the campaign of women in Palermo for water (when there are shortages the middle-class areas don't suffer), for an un-married mother's allowance from the State.

They have been active in factories where women workers have fought tooth and nail against lay-offs, redundancies and closures in order to keep their wages and organisation. With women home workers and seasonal workers who are on the move once more for better conditions and wages and guaranteed pay when there's no work.

In particular the Women's Commissions have been active together with women from other left groups and feminist collectives in setting up women's neighbourhood health centres where for the first time women can get free (or low cost) gynaecological advice and treatment. Where women (and men) can meet to discuss health, sexuality, women's oppressive conditioning, the hazards of bad housing and working conditions.

THE PRESENT DEBATE

On December 6th 1975 there was a demonstration in favour of abortion in Rome called by the Italian feminist groups. It was to be for women only with no banners of left groups. Women from LC mobilised nationally for the demonstration - it was publicised and the mobilisation reported in LC's national daily newspaper - and marched with the contingents from the situations and towns where they were organising.

The comrades - men and women - from one particular branch in a neighbourhood in Rome called Cinecitta, decided that LC must be represented on the march by a banner and that men must be allowed to participate in solidarity with women.

As the demonstration was forming ranks the comrades of Cinecitta tried to bring in their banner. There were arguments and scuffles as they were pushed out. As the march proceeded men comrades tried to insert themselves into the cordons of women and were pushed out. Finally some of the comrades, attacked the demonstration, fighting broke out between the men, the women and the stewards (men from other left groups) and several women got beaten up.

This incident caused an immediate crisis in Lotta Continua. Suddenly the 'question of women' - feminism - was forced into the forefront of the debate. There were articles and letters in the newspaper and meetings held at all levels of the organisation to discuss what had happened and how things should go on.

The main body of this pamphlet is made up of extracts from translations of letters, articles and reports taken from LC's daily newspaper. Of course this illustrates the level and direction of the discussions only partially and from one source. But it also illustrates the use of the newspaper to let everyone in on an "internal" debate and to open up this discussion to all militants without fear or shame.

Many new positive things have resulted in LC's work from the debate touched off by the December 6th march. The debate about "personal life and political activity" has been pushed forward, comrades are questioning their way of working, their way of speaking, demanding more space to develop their abilities to understand politics and express themselves.

Recently, for the first time, women militants who intervene at Fiat in Turin have put leaflets into the factory for the women workers about abortion and the meaning of the government's policies for women. They talked to the women workers at the gates (and told the men to take the leaflets home to their wives and daughters). Two women who do typesetting for the newspaper wrote a letter to the paper asking that it be run more collectively to include everyone in decisions about articles and layout. There has also been the first national meeting of all women in LC. This is just the beginning!

The material covered here is only a small part of the debate which has continued and improved as emotions cool and the discussions take place more and more at local and branch levels.

The situation in Britain isn't identical to the situation in Italy by any means but we hope that this pamphlet will be an interesting and useful contribution to our discussions in the Women's Movement about women's autonomy and our work in or with mixed revolutionary groups.

Despite the bitterness, the anger and the disillusion, I am glad that this contradiction has come out into the open, and that it has come out in all its crudity and brutality, with all its most reactionary characteristics. But now is not the time for recriminations and back-biting, nor is it the time for compromises. Feminist comrades in Lotta Continua, let us force this debate and this confrontation to its limits, with the other women comrades, the men and with the leadership.

We must push this debate forward with the same strength that we use in political confrontation with the other organisations, and with the feminist comrades who, according to a real anti-feminist logic, want to expel us yet again from the political arena, on the grounds that women have nothing to say on the problem of the government. But we have something to say on everything, and not just us the militants. We must organise ourselves both to speak out and to act. We must involve all the working class women we meet and with whom we struggle together every day. Let's not forget our comrade Adele, who, as a housewife, mother of three children and wife of a comrade worker, began to take politics into the home, from the moment she joined Lotta Continua, winning the right to smoke, to not iron handkerchiefs and the right to make love when she felt like it.

BROADENING THE DISCUSSION

Let's not make this an issue between the women's commissions and the leadership. Rather it must be seen as an issue between the women and men who are struggling to achieve communism. Let's not forget the women of Picanello, who asked their doctor for a type of contraception which would allow them to experience the pleasure of love-making, since, like so many other women, after years of intercourse with their husbands, they had never once experienced an orgasm.

Let's not leave out women workers in the Communist Party from our battle within the party - since they have sided with our women comrades in our battles against the bureaucrats of the factory councils.

Let's discuss how to advance our struggle both outside and within the party, with the women of Via Palermo who embroider at home, the grandmothers, mothers and daughters together, and who asked me, on seeing my wedding ring, why on earth had I, as a revolutionary, got married, since marriage is a rip off for us women. Let's discuss with women tech college students, with the school-girls at Boggiolera, who could not come to Rome because their fathers locked them up in the house. With Rosalba, who only managed to get to Rome because her mother made her father believe that she was sleeping in bed, by talking aloud to her as if she was in the house. Let's also talk with her mother.

THE NEED TO BE OPEN

I am not shamed to silence by the fact that there are both men and women comrades in my organisation who tried to disrupt our women's demonstration. Nor am I shamed to silence by the fact that I was physically attacked by militants in my own party. The

contradiction is both within the wider society and within the party. Those working class women are not afraid to tell their husbands they've had enough, and to continue the struggle within the home, while I hope at the same time, recognising that their husbands are good comrades who also are fighting for communism.

We must not be ashamed, we must not feel that we are shabbier as an organisation than others, since in the other revolutionary parties, there is perhaps expressed by the men that paternalistic benevolent tolerance, which is nothing but an expression of that male contempt which we know so well.

Comrades, we must be distrustful of all men who claim to be feminists; since they have not given up their privileged position, and are just looking for a more elegant way of maintaining it, by trying to become our vanguard. We must force both those men and women who take up and justify a male viewpoint, to reckon with our strength.

A PROBLEM OF POWER

And now let us come to more physical matters: next time we must organise our stewarding more efficiently. We must denounce in public those comrades who attacked us violently. We must discuss with those women involved in struggle in their homes how to stop their husbands locking them up and beating them in their homes, and we must denounce them at meetings. The first thing to make a man change is for him to discover that he has something to fear from us: they must be made to fear our clarity of thought, our organisation and our autonomy.

If there was a pill for men, we know that we could not trust them to take it. I remember to take the pill every night like clockwork because I will be the one to get pregnant and I am afraid of the consequences. There will only be a reliable pill for men when they fear the consequences.

At the bottom of it all it comes down to a problem of power: the power of women within the movement which is struggling for working class power. Sisters, the time of complaining is finished. We must see things as they really are: our courage is not foolhardiness, but comes from the thousands of women who live and struggle and shout, "Free abortion on demand", and who do not only mean that they want to decide when to have children, but that they want to rediscover their sexuality, their own identity and autonomy.

We must not give up our role as the vanguard: we must take the initiative in building a stronger women's movement. We must take the initiative in discovering together within our own movement all the new ways in which women are expressing themselves in factories, in neighbourhoods, in schools and in their own families. We must reevaluate and generalise all our smallest collective experiences. Like we did in Catania when we all caught the train together late at night. In that town half the population obey a curfew after 9 o'clock in the evening. Yet we went out to catch our train joyously laughing at all those who mocked us and called us lesbians. And the joy on the train to be all together, with no rivalries, to be able to talk to each other endlessly, to make up

slogans together. We were happy to enjoy our own autonomy and to do the stewarding on the train despite all kinds of provocation.

WE MUST GO FORWARD

There are so many things to say: that we need to open up the debate of what we expect today from our party, that the comrades responsible for the provocation in Rome must pay for it, especially those who are part of the leadership; that the National Committee and the Secretariat must engage in a process of self-criticism, beginning by opening up to discussion the composition of the National Committee itself. Because if it is shown that the presence of women in the leadership is not important, if the leadership in fact simply transmits male viewpoints on everything then it is deluding itself that it is always the viewpoint of the working class. But the discussion must be carried forward with energy and confidence.

A LUMINOUS DEMONSTRATION -- DESPITE THE LAMPSHADE

A LETTER FROM MARIANNA OF PALERMO - January 6th 1976

The demonstration of Saturday 6th has certainly clarified things a bit but above all it has proved so much of what sisters have been saying for years, often with great difficulty, and very often without the rest of the organisation understanding them.

We said, two years ago, that the Women's Commissions were not a structure like the others, that a political intervention among women was not a sector of intervention like the work with soldiers or the students, but that it was originated with sisters in Lotta Continua and ended with working class women. We argued with the comrades of the Workers' Commissions because for us to intervene in factories where women work meant and still means talking to women who are also workers. Since then we have understood clearly what it meant to talk of the women's question and to introduce into our organisation the word 'personal'.

When the women comrades of Lotta Continua set in motion their movement, not as a vanguard, but in response to the voice of the women's movement which since the Divorce Referendum of 1972 had become central in the revolutionary movement; the word feminism was muttered and in this way, in ambiguous terms, the Women's Commissions were born. But there was fear, and an element of opportunism linked with it, together with an unawareness of what role feminism had played in the history of the class struggle over the last 100 years. Then just as feminism was getting a bit stronger, the opinion within the party hardened against it and it was seen as mistaken for the feminist movement and the party to be integrated, and so we began to use the term 'feminism' more and more frequently.

Since December 6th, we shout it at the tops of our voices. We are feminists, conscious above all of the responsibility which we accept in the eyes of the whole movement, in the eyes of the party, conscious of the role which we want to and have to play in the revolutionary process. We, as feminists in Lotta Continua, are on the left wing of the organisation: we are militants of the

party and the vanguard of the masses of the women....

I believe that the women's movement has something fundamental to teach our party, especially at a time when 'popular power' is expanding and leaving its mark on every institution, and showing up as ineffective the way in which the party has structured itself up to now. It is important to understand how the figure of the external militant tends to disappear; within the women's movement the sisters in Lotta Continua are the vanguard of the masses, struggling against the contradictions they face in their own lives, and it is because of this that they have always understood the importance and the extent of women's struggles. A woman in struggle is forced immediately to confront her role in the family, and this is fundamental.

There is another important thing which the women and their autonomous movement have taught all comrades: a new way of acting politically, of behaving in meetings, of getting involved with the working class, which is full of life and joy instead of reinforcing alienation.

I think that this must have been one of the most beautiful and worthwhile things to come out of December 6th: it was a procession of 'light', and though some people tried to shut out our light they were ineffective. I am not speaking rhetorically when I say that the stewarding was like a dance, and the whole procession was an explosion of life. So there it is, dear comrades, the women want to let their own light shine out, and your role in relation to the women's movement is to accept it and to respect its autonomy.

The man-woman contradiction is not unresolvable, but before it can be completely resolved, it must explode in all its intensity. We as women will find ourselves more and more often having to defend our rights against the bosses, the Moro Government, the women who have completely lost any self-awareness. But also against the comrades, both brothers and sisters, who as a result of a false love for the party are afraid of seeing its importance and unity diminished by the autonomous organisation of feminist comrades.

LETTER FROM PASQUA, HOUSEWIFE OF MONTE SANT'ANGELO (Foggia)

I disagree with certain ideas which have come out into the open during this debate which tend towards a bourgeois conception, in that it counterposes women to men, and argues in terms of categories and not of classes. Therefore these ideas tend to divert the struggle of women in a mistaken direction against the male.

But I maintain that a struggle which wins results, must be waged against the main enemy, which is capitalism, in whose interests it is to maintain discrimination against women. There is also a general tendency which argues that women should only be concerned with women's issues, but I say, sisters, that we are communists first, and feminists second. We are revolutionary militants and we must focus on the destruction of the capitalist system, and for a socialist society within which the complete liberation of women will become a possibility.

LETTER FROM COMRADE ANSELMO OF MOGLIANO VENETO

If the issue of women's liberation is of fundamental importance for the revolution all revolutionaries should be involved in it, irrespective of sex. Let me make an analogy: during the occupation of a textile factory, Minimoda, where the workforce was almost entirely made up of women, there were several demonstrations which I and several other male workers took part in. Now in these demonstrations, the women workers of Minimoda did not throw us out, since they had understood that we were there to support them, and that we were struggling together.

It is a pity that the newspaper was used so little to prepare for the December 6th demonstration, so that there was a better understanding of different positions within the party beforehand.

LETTER FROM COMRADE REMO OF ROMA,

who defines himself as a male chauvinist, raises the question of sexual liberation.

Let us examine the material base for the mistaken ideas that exist on this question, both among the masses and among comrades. Antifeminism aside, it is important that sexual liberation, the need to have a sexual life, not to repress ones self, exists in men, in hundreds of thousands of young men and comrades. And the existence of thousands and thousands of prostitutes, an important section of women, cannot be ignored or forgotten if it is true that hundreds of thousands of men, of workers, of comrades, frequent prostitutes. Are they all fascists, comrade sisters? Must we expel them all?

This is not pure rhetoric so as to maintain the status quo. It is a contribution to the discussion, a biased one maybe, but from a self-confessed male-chauvinist comrade who is convinced that the battle which you must fight in the first place is above all among the masses, within the family, without shutting yourselves up in your introverted women's groups.

LETTER FROM SISTERS IN THE WOMEN'S COMMISSION OF PIOMBINO

The discussion must develop to consider how to guarantee women comrades in Lotta Continua the possibility of taking part in the leadership. And here I am talking of women like us in Piombino, who are married to men comrades, and have children. This problem confronts not just us but all comrades, both men and women who cannot be full time militants. And we see why the leadership of Lotta Continua becomes dominated by men or women comrades who do not lead typical lives, and because of this cannot represent within Lotta Continua the point of view of women.

So we must demand that our views be represented in the party, by having a right to take part in the National Committee and in the local leadership structures immediately. Only in this way can we guarantee that the discussion is carried to its limits and that the problems raised by the Rome demonstration are resolved correctly.

EDITORIAL OF DECEMBER 12TH - 1975

I want to take part in this debate by taking up some of the arguments raised in a meeting held in Rome on Tuesday. A few days ago I wrote an article on the state of health of our organisation for the newspaper. Our health was put to the test by the new things in this political phase and the new things in the movement which were expressed last Saturday.

THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE "UN-NATURALISED"

To put it bluntly, the "new" interrupted our National Committee meeting on the Saturday evening after the demonstration. A delegation of women comrades - a very large number of women from many different cities - invaded the NC office and our debate. This is a scandalous thing to happen to an orderly political party - but an excellent thing to happen in a revolutionary party! Particularly when it is discussing a working-class movement which is characterised by an articulate and widespread push forward to attack all institutions and about a force which pervades our very organisation and is changing it. That this push reached the point of changing the nature of an orderly session of our highest structure of political direction shows that it is to some extent an "institution". That it contains the possibility of putting up resistance to the new things within the movement. The fact that this came about because of the women's Movement (which the women comrades represented moreso than the Women's Commissions of Lotta Continua) is no accident. Without considering the merit of the different positions which came out in that assembly, that "invasion" was a good thing and this is the first point to be made and to think about.

For those who saw it Saturday's demonstration was an extraordinary mass experience. Before our eyes was the concentrated strength and quality of a movement which has been growing for years through an infinite and diverse number of struggle experiences.

Many men comrades, militants and leaders in Lotta Continua, have ignored these experiences or they had an indirect or abstract knowledge of them. Whoever was present on Saturday saw all the experiences united concretely (and therefore far stronger than their sum total) in a single moment. Many militants and leaders in Lotta Continua would have been annoyed or perplexed by the idea that men couldn't march with the women and swell the numbers to more than double. That annoyance and confusion was dispelled by the beauty and power of the march. It showed the fundamental difference between a march for women and a march of women.

THE PRESENCE OF LOTTA CONTINUA

The men and women comrades of Cinecitta maintained that the presence of LC on the march had to be shown by a banner. OK, so the presence of LC was big and ranged throughout the length of the march - but it didn't need any label in order to express itself. This is an important lesson to be learned. But there's something more instructive than just our numerical participation, which was the result of a lot of hard work by our women comrades. That is the quality of this partici-

pation. There was a large number of combative working-class women on the march, especially in the contingents from the south. Many of these women are the protagonists of social struggles, like the one for water in Palermo, for homes, against the high cost of living etc. They are building their own political formation in these struggles. They are learning to recognise their enemies like the Christian Democratic Party which many of them voted for in the past and whose regime they are consciously trying to bring down today. They are building their own cultural revolution, about the concept of family, morality and the world. Even more significant was the presence of a few men in those contingents of working-class women because they were their husbands whom they'd brought along - brought out of their homes by their wives who have come out of their homes! This is an exemplary path which has brought women to Rome to demonstrate for abortion, for the freedom to choose and against the government. This is the fruit of a struggle being carried on not only (and not very much) by the Women's Commissions but by the whole party. It's a working-class struggle in which the contradiction between men and women doesn't disappear, doesn't get suffocated, but is brought into the open and becomes part of the daily life of the working-class and the party, thus changing it.

THE TWO PATHS

Lotta Continua was present on the demonstration through other women too. The many women comrades who are organising starting from their contradiction as women, in the Abortion Campaign, around Women's Health Clinics, sexuality, the role of the family and women's autonomy. This presence was just as important and is the fruit of the Women's Commissions work which has been carried on in some cities with a good relationship to the party and in others in isolation.

These women arrived in Rome by different paths but we must recognise this without reserve. The difference between these paths is destined to exist for a long time and can't be idealistically cancelled out. To counterpose communism and feminism means to mistrust the working-class. When our women comrades say that all comrades in LC must be feminists they are asserting their trust in the working-class and in communism.

THE POLITICAL LINE

On the march the political line which we hold to be correct was completely hegemonous. It came out as the freedom of women to decide for themselves, in the abortion struggle, in the recognition by women that the government is their enemy. The absolute hegemony of this line emphasizes the seriousness of the political error made by many comrades in Rome. Even more serious - despite good intentions - was the choice to shout a slogan like "No divisions in the working-class, men and women for the revolution", during the march. This showed the total incomprehension of the fact that a strategic objective had to come about tactically through the autonomy of that demonstration.

FEAR OF CONTRADICTION

I know that many comrades wanted to actively take part in the demonstration to show their own solidarity with women's struggle. Because of this it's important to recognise the way the old oppresses the new which is blossoming. In this

situation the slogan I mentioned above only means fear of contradiction and the difficulty in confronting it. That slogan, while affirming the fundamental contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, denies the fundamental contradiction in the proletariat between men and women. Within the proletariat there are many contradictions and we must constantly recognise them and confront them correctly (employed and unemployed, small and large factories, skilled and unskilled, young and old etc). The division between men and women isn't just one among many. It is a fundamental one and also has a different quality. This isn't a division between one strata and another of society but a division which separates two entire humanities. This is a division which is far older than capitalism and is destined to have consequences beyond the immediate toppling of capitalist power. Because of this, those who think of the women's movement as one section among many others in the class line-up - like the student movement, the soldiers, the unemployed etc - completely misunderstand its nature. The struggle of women invests with unequalled force the relationship between collective transformation and individual transformation which is a decisive quality of the communist character of a revolutionary process. In other words, the cultural revolution is neither "something more" nor "something after" the proletarian revolution.

THE TWO ASPECTS OF THE CONTRADICTION

There are two aspects of the contradiction between men and women. One is the contradiction between the female working-class and the male working-class (in the relationships which reproduce the social existence of classes) and the other is between men and women in daily life (in the relationships which reproduce the single existence of individuals). Those "two paths" in the struggle of women which the march in Rome showed and for a moment unified, correspond in the substance of this dual aspect of the fundamental contradiction within the working-class. Because we are dealing with a content which regards every area of the class struggle it's important that we are able to recognise this.

THE WOMEN'S COMMISSIONS

We must take into account that something which appears incoherent is in reality correct: that is that the whole party lives and acts with the female working-class and that the Women's Commissions are no less necessary because of this. We must remember that within the party too the fundamental contradiction is between men and women. The party also has its "social life" and its "daily life".

That which must be overcome in the party is not the distinction (in organisational structures) between the party and the Women's Commissions but rather the political separateness. Because the two aspects of the contradiction have a relative independence but are not rigidly separable, the overlap of work in the different structures of the party and the Women's Commissions is necessary.

In proposing that there should be a large number of women comrades from the Women's Commissions in every organ of lead-

ership: it's a matter of understanding whether we want to "co-opt" a few women comrades or whether we want through them to bring in the richness of a contradiction which can't be delegated to presumed "total leaders" (even when they would love to declare themselves feminists). Our theses on the party and our constitution are inadequate. They are limited to saying that there is a necessity to have women in all the leadership structures. There are already many situations where women are the majority in the organisation and leadership and still the presence of women who represent specifically the contradiction between men and women is not recognised or only given token recognition.

THE DEBATE ABOUT ROME

It's bad to ignore or underestimate the relationship between the situation in Rome and our comrades' role there in this period, and the problems that exploded on Saturday. It's bad not only because it gives an arbitrary image of our organisation in Rome but above all because it prevents us from seeing in this experience the emergence of all the crucial questions we're facing everywhere in this current phase. It's a mistake for us not to report as a relevant event in the newspaper the collective discussion which took place in Rome three days after the march and which was attended by 800 comrades. This is an important political fact for LC just as much as the struggles we report. Which brings back an old deficiency in the way we use the newspaper as a way of informing people about the life and political battle within the party. To quote our theses "there is nothing, or almost nothing - vigilance being our only rigid guideline - which is discussed in the party which cannot be discussed among the masses."

OUR OWN LANGUAGE

I want to take up the question of the use, by some women comrades, of the term "fascist" with reference to the Rome comrades. One thing is obvious - such an accusation is terrible for any comrade and even more so for those in question whose anti-fascist militancey is exemplary. But there's no need to dwell on words which were said involuntarily in a situation of tension. That which is far more worrying in seeing this word in several written statements, is that it has something to do with a "theory" which is unacceptable within our ranks. I mean an anti-historical and antimaterialist theory of fascism which in some way makes it an enemy of "human nature" instead of the product of the exploitive and oppressive "nature" of capitalism. This expansion and deformation of the concept is unacceptable in a country which has known and knows fascism. Let's not bring down the important antifascist work we do by applying this term, which is irreparably insulting and damaging, to bourgeois behaviour within the proletariat and within our party.

THE POLITICAL BATTLE AND THE DISCIPLINARY BATTLE

There have been some attempts to treat this error as a transgression and change the political battle into a disciplinary battle. We must firmly oppose this. Some comrades in Rome - among the most combative men and women - have narrowly interpreted the political line to the point of separating it from

politics. They maintained that their presence and slogans were necessary to put forward the political line and in doing so they didn't put politics first. Holding up the march, obstinately defending their own banner, forcing their way violently into the unified cordons of women and clashing with the stewards (men from other left groups) are the consequences of this mistaken position.

THE RIGHT TO BE THE LEFT HAS TO BE WON BACK EVERY TIME

What is the background of this position? There is the development of the political situation in Rome and the role LC has played in this. There is the antifascist mobilisation against the fascist attacks and police provocation which have escalated quickly over the past year. The assassination of the student Pietro Bruno by fascists was a turning point in Rome.

After the nth assassination LC didn't respond with the nth militant demonstration of anger and protest. We took the responsibility of making the student movement the protagonists of a struggle which drew together the strands of the class struggle in this period - against the bosses, for smashing the complicity of the revisionists - and made the fall of the Moro government an objective for the whole movement.

The comrades held the streets for 4 days, they called the school strike of December 2nd. They broke with revisionist forces and forced some of them to ally themselves with the objective of kicking out the government. They prepared and guaranteed the victory of the soldiers demonstration of December 4th. In all these days, adapting themselves to the intense rhythm of the struggle in Rome and elsewhere, the comrades have done an excellent job. Their unpreparedness for the different nature of the abortion demonstration made a good job into a bad one. The political strength of the other demonstrations lay in their material strength, i.e. in the participation of masses of people. The political strength of the demonstration of December 6th wasn't the numerical participation but the content and autonomy which was expressed. The dangers which arise from our political choices in the current phase have been thrown up concretely: group patriotism, using an offensive political line in a defensive way, responding in a way which leaves us open to isolation. These are mistakes which could happen anywhere and because of this we need a broad and up-to-date analysis of every experience. Precise and constant self-criticism is the only way to reduce the possibility of mistakes.

There are no universal recipes - always attack or always retreat or always stay in the middle. There is a lesson of practice for working out the right and wrong and this means analysis, discussion and correction. This debate raises all our main problems at one time. This doesn't distort the importance of women's struggle, on the contrary, outside of this broad context the women's movement would risk building its own funeral pile which is something none of us wants.

*could

Adriano Sofri
General Secretary of LC

Editor's note: This is not a straight translation of the newspaper article but an edited version.

ACCOUNTS OF LOCAL MEETINGS

After the events of December 6th branch meetings and city-wide meetings for all members of LC were held all over the country. The discussions in these meetings weren't limited to the specific events of the demonstration but talked about power relationships, internal democracy, collectivity, personal/political, and women's autonomy. The discussions and motions passed in the city-wide meetings in Milan, Turin and Rome were published in the newspaper.

We give here a brief account of the outcome of these meetings but we will go into more detail about the meeting held in Turin. This is not only because Fiat Mirafiori in Turin which has been so central to Lotta Continua's political development is there but also because the discussion was written up so graphically by the Turin Women's Commission for the newspaper. It can give us a good idea of what discussions may have been like elsewhere.

MILAN

The Milan Women's Commission published an article on December 13th which criticised the National Committee and others for referring to the demonstration as being against the Moro government. They felt it represented - because of the strength of the women's movement - a specific struggle around abortion which was able to broaden out to "I will decide about everything" - a struggle by women to change and control their own lives.

They protested that comrades were still being called "militants who struggle against exploitation and oppression" whereas they accuse these militants of knowing no other way to argue than to use crowbars to impose their presence and of being incapable of making the most elementary political evaluations.

They said that in LC there still exists an idea of objectives at any cost which claims that the specific objectives of women students and factory workers satisfy the problem of women's general condition.

A motion presented by the Milan Women's Commission to a city-wide meeting of all comrades was passed by a majority vote. Basically it said:

"We ask for the resignation of the entire Rome Secretariat because it hasn't taken responsibility for the problem and it has never given the women comrades in Rome any space even though they've asked many times for a debate on women. We ask for a motion of censure on the NC. We ask for a people's trial and public self-criticism of the comrades involved in the attack leading to disciplinary measures or expulsion if they don't co-operate. We ask for the resignation of Vida as National Co-ordinator of the Women's Commissions."

They made a lengthy criticism of Vida for mediating between the party and the Women's Commissions and not being feminist. They ended by calling for women to organise and control meeting to educate all comrades in the organisation about women's issues. They also proposed that a national meeting of all LC women be held.

ROME

The debate from the city-wide meeting in Rome of around 1,000 comrades, was published on two consecutive days in the newspaper. Two motions were presented, one by the Provincial Committee, one by the Rome Women's Commission but no vote was taken. There was also a statement from the Cinecitta branch.

MOTION BY THE PROVINCIAL COMMITTEE

It began by pointing out the need for self-criticism on the part of the whole organisation in Rome and especially the leadership. The events of the 6th happened, it said, because of the inability of the Rome leadership to interpret the new and revolutionary content of the women's movement, because LC has been so slow in developing a debate on women, and because of the virtual detachment between the Women's Commissions and territorial structures. Between organising with women and organising in general. It didn't agree with the calls for the Rome Secretariat to resign since this wouldn't help to clarify the political line and the contradictions within the party. Finally it declared a phase of preparation for LC's next congress. "We want to open debate in the party and among the masses on the new political phase, the contents of the class struggle and on this basis verify our political line, our leadership structures at all levels, and the tools for political intervention and organisation."

MOTION BY THE ROME WOMEN'S COMMISSION

1) We maintain that the position taken by the leadership who tried to recuperate the contradiction in a general, complex discussion, when most comrades are facing feminism for the first time, is not useful for a deeper understanding of the problem.

2) We don't think that the self-criticism made by the Cinecitta section, which took place in our offices, is good enough. Our dirty sheets must be washed among the masses.

The debate must be based on the contents and autonomy of the women's movement and not on the backward hypothesis which makes the Women's Commission one of the main defendants in this situation. The debate must not be limited by backward ideas which the women's movement overcame long ago. Our line must be verified in the masses. The party must adapt to the masses, not the other way around.

We are willing to furnish all possible material: reading lists, documents, articles etc. to help comrades in their understanding.

3) We want to confront the problem of democracy in the party. For comrades who've shown they don't know how to or don't want to behave correctly in relation to the masses, we say that the resignation of the Rome Secretariat isn't a formal disciplinary question. We want their resignation to stimulate a general discussion on the specific problem which includes how the Rome office is run.

STATEMENT FROM THE CINECITTA COMRADES

"We want to make a contribution to this discussion not just from our branch but from all the comrades who rallied behind the banner we carried on December 6th.

We admit that we carried a Lotta Continua banner to the march which with regard to the character, political importance and beauty of the march added nothing. We insist that the organised presence of the men and women comrades wasn't meant as a counterposition to the march. We maintain a positive position to this discussion.

We think that we have opened up, forcefully, a contradiction which already existed in the masses and in the party. In our office in Rome, on the specific problems of women and on our work as a party to build an organised women's movement there is a right-wing position and a left-wing position. As we see it the right-wing are those comrades who, within a correct political analysis, practice and put forward positions which are not verified by mass intervention but rather in 'intergroup' meetings. (Ed. note: joint meetings of left groups) The two positions which came out on the march weren't the result of our banner but rather the result of actual counterpositions which exist in the party and in the movement.

We are the first to criticise ourselves for lacking an offensive line on this problem. The time taken up with recent events caused us to push into second place the battle for a discussion on a different line. It should start from experiences of mass interventions, from the work carried out in the community and in the structures which deal with women students. Especially those in technical colleges who have organised autonomously with a lot of difficulties even though the women comrades of the Women's Commissions haven't helped them at all.

We defend our right and duty as communist militants to take this debate into all sectors of the working-class where we are intervening because our proposals as a working-class organisation will be verified among and for the masses. We ask that discussions be organised for all comrades in LC to talk about these issues."

MOTION BY THE TURIN WOMEN'S COMMISSION

In Turin the Women's Commission proposed a motion calling for a debate within LC on the link between feminism and communism. They called for everyone to take part in the political battle and said that it's the task of all feminist women in LC to contribute to it and clarify what the priorities are.

Another aspect of the debate which they brought up was democracy in the party, democratic centralism, and the measures to take with regard to comrades who relate incorrectly to the masses.

"Sisters, let's take into account that this battle will be won also by using the more formal means. Either we succeed in taking down the most macho comrades from their positions of power and restore them only when they have shown with self-criticism that they understand the political problems which led to their wrong attitude, or else the battle will be

lost and suffocated because they have the power to suffocate it and they will use it."

"This is the concrete way in which we, recognising in ourselves an expression of the women's movement, can confront within the party the relationship between the movement and the party. This isn't a cultural or ideological battle. We play and win based on very precise power relationships."

They too called for the resignation of the leadership of the Rome federation and the comrades in charge of Cinecitta.

THE CITY-WIDE MEETING IN TURIN

On December 13th there was a meeting for all LC comrades in Turin. 600 comrades sat through a 6 hour meeting where 80 people spoke. It began in an atmosphere of tension which was scorching hot by the end of the meeting. The women of the Women's Commission sat in the chair and around the front of the room together with women comrades who have lately joined the battle as women. There were also women invited from feminist groups who wanted to take part in the debate and the men comrades who are sympathetic to the women. The middle of the room was filled with comrades anxious to understand and at the back of the room were those who are the most antagonistic.

The women from the Women's Commission introduced the discussion. They began by emphasizing the need to confront the male-female contradiction as it exists within the party and the way it's experienced in the life and political work of every militant. "Starting from ourselves, speaking clearly and simply means a new way of working politically. This is the method the women's movement has carried on, together with the political contents, as the struggle against power. The struggle carried on by the women's movement has a precise basis in the oppression and exploitation which women, as such, experience. A struggle which opens contradictions in the whole working-class, which takes from the bosses their "private" spaces in which the ideology of exploitation is passed on and recuperated."

THE DISCUSSION: When the floor was thrown open, the first point was the criticism of the Women's Commissions for not bringing more working-class women into the party. A woman comrade from Falchera (Ed. note: an area where there are a lot of housing struggles) responded by pointing out that women are in the front lines of community struggles. Just by fighting for the right to struggle they gain a feminist consciousness and challenge their role in the family, their relationship to husband and kids, and society. "The party has made the mistake in the past of using the struggles of women who have big material contradictions without understanding the need to begin from their specific problems. So when the struggles ended the women always went home again."

A woman comrade from Mirafiori spoke about being a militant and a mother and explained how her struggle for the right to be involved politically meant preventing her husband from taking a leadership position. Another woman comrade spoke about how winning the right for women to be able to intervene at the gate of Fiat was a feminist battle but she felt that this wasn't enough. She said that many times in arguing with heavy male workers she felt like a "scab" and wanted to struggle with other women in an autonomous movement with - 18 -

specific objectives, as well as with men for communism. A new woman recruit spoke of her difficulties in getting education about women's politics and about her own situation as a woman in the organisation.

SELF-CRITICISM BY MEN: A comrade worker said he was convinced that the clash in Rome was sexual - just men wanting to impose their supremacy over women yet again. He felt it was right for "heads to fall" because this would ensure real power for women in the organisation. He spoke of his wife's struggle against the division of housework (her job) and political work (his job).

Other workers spoke paternalistically about how they'd tried many times to get their wives politically involved but they just didn't want to know.

The divisions in the meeting emerged more and more clearly as the discussion went on. The biggest argument was over the point in the motion proposed by the women about the resignations. Finally comrades of the Turin Secretariat began to speak up but only one came out clearly in favour of the women's motion and only two voted for it. The motion was passed.

CONCLUSIONS: The women felt the meeting was good because it included so many comrades and so many spoke (many more couldn't because time ran out). It was good because so many spoke from their personal experience and though more men spoke, for the first time many women found the courage to stand up and speak.

"The method of our party to confront problems with courage and openness was very productive. Votes against the motion came from external and internal militants from the Mirafiori branch - women too - and from the stewards service. This shows where the debate on the most personal sexual and material contradictions hasn't been developed. The fact that "bourgeoisie out of the party" was shouted after the vote was taken shows the importance of this debate and that we must carry it forward without mystification or ambiguity."

FOR FURTHER READING:

TAKE OVER THE CITY
ORGANISING FOR WORKER'S POWER
ITALY OCTOBER 1974
1974 DOSSIER (Section on Italy)

SOME BIG FLAME PUBLICATIONS...

WOMEN'S STRUGGLE NOTES, Nos. 7 & 8

WE WON'T PAY (about the Tower Hill rent strike)

BIG FLAME JOURNAL (articles on the crisis,
hospitals and women in Portugal...)

OUR WORK AND PERSPECTIVES

BIG FLAME - monthly newspaper in 4 editions

FILMS BY THE NEWSREEL COLLECTIVE

"AN EGG IS NOT A CHICKEN"

"HOUSEY HOUSEY"

"ON THE SIDE OF THE PEOPLE"

THERE ARE BIG FLAME GROUPS IN:

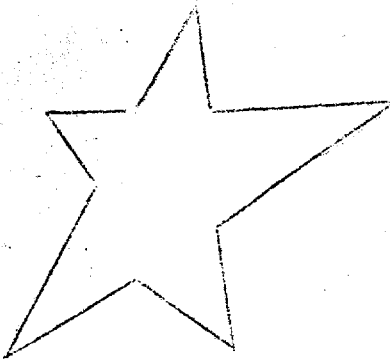
SOUTH LONDON
79c Annerly Road
London SE.20
01-659-3895

WEST LONDON
20 Sycamore Gardens
London W.12
01-749-5334

MANCHESTER
317 Bradford Road
Manchester 10
061-205-5895

LIVERPOOL
217 Wavertree Road
Liverpool 7
051-207-5400

LEEDS
25 Lucas Street
Leeds 6
0532-457-177



Some or all of the publications listed at the bottom of page 19
can be obtained from RISING FREE BOOKSHOP, 197 Kings Cross
Road, WC1...

SOME BIG FLAME PUBLICATIONS...

WOMEN'S STRUGGLE NOTES, Nos. 7 & 8

WE WON'T PAY (about the Tower Hill rent strike)

BIG FLAME JOURNAL (articles on the crisis,
hospitals and women in Portugal...)

OUR WORK AND PERSPECTIVES

BIG FLAME - monthly newspaper in 4 editions

FILMS BY THE NEWSREEL COLLECTIVE

"AN EGG IS NOT A CHICKEN"

"HOUSEY HOUSEY"

"ON THE SIDE OF THE PEOPLE"

THERE ARE BIG FLAME GROUPS IN:

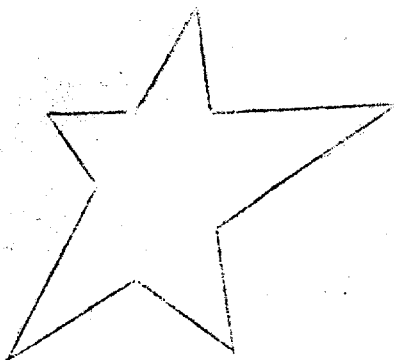
SOUTH LONDON
79c Annerly Road
London SE.20
01-659-3895

WEST LONDON
20 Sycamore Gardens
London W.12
01-749-5334

MANCHESTER
317 Bradford Road
Manchester 10
061-205-5895

LIVERPOOL
217 Wavertree Road
Liverpool 7
051-207-5400

LEEDS
25 Lucas Street
Leeds 6
0532-457-177



Some or all of the publications listed at the bottom of page 19
can be obtained from RISING FREE BOOKSHOP, 197 Kings Cross
Road, WC1....