

How women can change the labour movement

In this article, first published as a paper for the first Fightback conference, Gerry Byrne explains how the Fightback campaign links in with the general perspective of building a mass working class based women's movement — a movement built in the struggle to remould the labour movement in line with women's needs and demands.

WOMEN ARE coming under the most severe attack on our rights and conditions since the War. We knew it would take a long fight to get the right to work, to child-care, to free health and equal education, to control our fertility and to define our sexuality, the right to maternity leave and financial independence; but at least we were inching forward.

Now it is all threatened, and the fragility of the reforms we have won must confront the women's movement with the need to re-think.

The groundwork for today's attacks was in many cases laid by the Labour government, especially its 1976 cuts. But the Tories are pushing us back on all fronts with a single-mindedness which calls into question the adequacy of our movement, organised around local struggles or particular aspects of our oppression.

The scale of the Tory attacks, against a background of sharp crisis, demands massive resources of human energy and organised strength, on a greater scale than the women's movement alone can muster.

That is potentially present in the labour movement, though its bureaucratic set-up, its domination by middle-aged white men who actually fear to win, and its conservative ideas, make it a difficult ally for the women's movement.

Many women active in groups and campaigns feel they can place no reliance on the labour movement to fight for women's rights, even though it is now confronting the same enemy. But it is not only women who cannot rely on the labour movement as it is: any group of workers, men or women, who engage in struggle with employers or the state, find that their leaders more often stand in the way. To make the most use of the vast potential of the labour movement — and the Labour Party too — the ordinary members need to take control. In that process, socialists and fighters for women's liberation must fight also against most of the ideas that dominate the movement: national interest, petty bargaining, sexism and racism.

But it is not only as an ally in the present struggles that we need to re-shape the labour movement.

The real social liberation of women is inconceivable in a society where resources are directed to where they will make a profit rather than to where they are needed by the majority of the people, whether they can pay or not. Our liberation is predicated on a qualitatively different system, one in which the vast mass of people who actually produce the social wealth will decide on how it is to be used. But how do we get such a system?

Roots of oppression

Marxism has always argued that it is the struggle of contending classes that produces major social changes; and that capitalism's life-long fundamental enemy — the working class — has both the potential of burying the profit system and the basic motivation and ability to reorganise society for mutual cooperation instead of cut-throat competition. Because the working class (including all its sectors: white-collar, service workers, etc.) is the first class in history with no vested interest in oppressing any other class, it can in freeing itself also free humanity for rule by the vast majority and put an end to repression and exploitation.

Women's oppression developed alongside class society. The subjugation of women, their isolation from social production and reduction to the role of childbearing and servicing of individual men in the family unit, arose with the rise of private property: private inherited wealth meant a woman tied to a man as his sexual property to ensure a 'legitimate' property line.

The family, in all epochs of class society, exists as the basic instrument of women's oppression. It is also one of the central pillars of class rule. For the ruling class, it ensures the succession of wealth and privilege; for the oppressed classes, it is a framework for instilling obedience, subservience and self-limitation in the interests of the rulers of society, and provides millions of isolated and competing units to break down the solidarity of the oppressed.

The real social equality of women will only be achieved by the disappearance of the family as an *economic* unit, and the breaking of the link between woman's biological role in child-bearing and her social role as child-rearer and home-keeper. It is easy to point to the facilities that will be needed to break this link: they are all the things the women's movement is fighting for now (though it is possible to envisage other gains too, such as the socialisation of housework). But there is no general agreement in the movement about the *social changes* that will be needed.

Marxists in the movement argue that women's liberation is inseparable from socialist revolution, and that socialist revolution is inseparable from working class struggle; not just economic struggle, but political and ideological struggle as well.

Women have a vital role to play here. Not only are we half the working class (and thousands of others striving for personal liberation too) and as such a major component in the economic struggle; but arguably we also have an irreplaceable political and ideological job to do, to clear away the sexist garbage that is so powerful a weapon in the establishment's armoury. For the working class can only overthrow class rule by breaking the mental and ideological chains that tie it to its present rulers. The working class cannot hope to organise society as the vast majority ruling itself, while at the same time maintaining racial oppression, anti-gay practices, or the enslaved position of half its number. And in fighting the sluggish reformist bureaucrats who channel the crippling ruling-class ideas into the working class, the radical energy of the women's movement is another bonus.

For the working class to successfully overthrow capitalism and put an end to oppression and exploitation, it must become conscious of just how oppressed women are, and it must take up and pursue the fight for the liberation of women as a central part of its own self-liberation.

There are of course other, more general, ideas that need to be fought for: an understanding of our history; an economic and social analysis of present-day capitalism; a sense of internationalism; a view of the state institutions, of parliament, of religion and ideas themselves, of strategies, tactics and principles that will lead the working class movement forward avoiding bourgeois snares; and a hundred other things. These are crucial tasks for socialists, men and women: and *Workers' Action* aims to contribute to these tasks.

The Women's Movement

THE YEARS SINCE the Second World War have brought major changes in our lives, sharpening the contradictions governing our lives.

The laundrette, convenience foods, and press-button heating have objectively cut down household labour. Advances in fertility control (though still terribly imperfect, and incomplete without abortion on demand) make us no longer slaves to our bodies. The growth of service jobs, the NHS, etc., have brought millions more women onto the 'labour market' and into the trade unions.

But these are low-status, low-paid jobs. In the unions, though we are a third of the members, our voice is small and weak. We are still utterly lumbered with the shopping, cooking and child-care, both because of the lack of socially provided facilities and because of men's barely changed expectations and demands for personal service: and this burden, whether we have another job or not, serves to isolate us and weigh us down, keeping us out of political and public life. And the media continue to portray us as the little woman in