

▶ the home, trivialising our lives. The loosening of the bonds of petty respectability has been paid for in an upsurge of the most vulgar and brutalising sexism.

Rising expectations meeting cramping limitations produced increasingly conscious anger and the formulation of our own demands. Added to this was the impetus of a parallel ferment; the labour movement in the late 1960s, increasingly pressed by the outriders of approaching capitalist crisis — unemployment, wage freezes, anti-union laws — was pushed into sharper confrontation with the system as a whole. In France in 1968, students' actions sparked a general strike of ten million workers in every sector of the economy (including media and professions), whose aspirations clearly went beyond a mere change of government.

In the USA, the black movement for civil rights of the early sixties in the southern states exploded in full-scale rebellion through dozens of industrial cities, demanding not just votes and jobs but pride and power and dignity too. And out of all this grew a women's movement echoing the black rebellion and the May events in the cry: we've waited too long.

In many ways, today's women's movement still retains the imprint of those days: the emphasis on pride and autonomy, the libertarian political outlook, the uneasy relationship to the organised labour movement, the radical élan, and the concern with personal alienation.

The women's movement is a living movement; it grows and develops; some early ideas have been pursued, clarified, and led to conclusions; some have been lost and rejected, have disappeared. Nor does it exist in a social

lead to passivity on the part of the led, a passivity that is our socially-given lot as women and which we are struggling to break free of. Delegation to 'responsible' bodies and people often means loss of control over decision-making, exclusion of minority opinions, manipulation by people who 'know the procedure', can 'handle meetings' and so on. Large meetings and complicated formalities can intimidate and soon drive away those who lack assertion and self-confidence — precisely those attributes that as women we are conditioned not to develop.

But lack of formal structures does not guarantee against dominance, leaders or unacknowledged cliques. Most women in the movement have probably experienced at some time that feeling on being on the outside looking in, a feeling that the real action, the real decision-making, is going on elsewhere. 'They' all seem to know each other, seem to have the same views on everything, and the only way to join the charmed circle is to acquiesce, nod your head and look like you know what you're on about.

All it proves is that organisation abhors a vacuum. Dispensing with structure doesn't make all the evils associated with it disappear. It's like the argument we use on abortion: making it illegal doesn't make it go away, it just drives it underground and makes it more dangerous. You can take the analogy too far, but the 'underground' organisation in the women's movement, the cliques, the unspoken leaders, is dangerous precisely because its 'non-existence' means there are no channels for change.

This way of organising interacts with the existing class base of the women's movement and conspires to exclude working class women because they do not share the same



The labour movement workshop at the first Fightback conference

vacuum: it interacts with other social forces, it picks up their ideas and develops them, it creates changes in other movements; it is sometimes repulsed, absorbed, diverted or distorted by them.

So the movement is not a dead thing, to be skewered and dissected or analysed as a specimen. But that does not absolve us of the responsibility of trying to understand it, take a measure of it, see how it changes and what is constant.

One of the constant features is the movement's concept of organisation. Spontaneity is valued above almost anything else. Hence, the almost across-the-board rejection of formal structures, of permanent positions, of hierarchies, rules, leaders, or even the possibility that these might develop. Hence, the emphasis on small groups, individual participation, rejection of delegation, of 'speaking for' anyone else, or indeed of decision-making at all beyond a collective 'organic' consensus.

To some extent this mode of organising is valuable, reflecting real insights into how formal organisation can deter participation; to some extent it is an unnecessary self-limitation on what the movement could achieve. Which outweighs the other, or can the gains and the losses be reconciled in some way? It has to be asked. It would not do for a movement which sets itself the aim of breaking down some of the most deeply-held but irrational ideas, the most ingrained prejudices, itself to raise its form of organising to a fetish, to be defended automatically against all comers.

What are the important and valuable features? The idea that formal structures can harden into a 'machine', the property of an elite, no longer controllable by those it is supposedly there to serve. The idea that leaders and hierarchies

experiences and social networks.

The massive scale of the attacks on our rights means that we need a movement that is capable of mobilising the mass of women and focusing their struggles. But the very ferocity of these attacks is also forcing thousands, hundreds of thousands, of women, to fight back. At first on a partial basis, in defence of a particular nursery, particular jobs that are threatened, or attempted wage cuts. But this opens the possibility of drawing them into a movement struggling against the whole range of attacks and for the complete liberation of women. We must make sure this movement is open to their involvement.

Small groups, informal discussions, consciousness raising sessions and rudimentary procedure are a good way of gaining confidence, of finding and exploring our way around new ideas, of working out what we really think and feel. These things are valuable gains. But why should they be *all* that the movement is? Wouldn't it be good to find ways of turning the *feelings* of solidarity we get in these groups into a really powerful effective solidarity that can take on the most powerful institutions in society and win.

To do that we also need ways of organising that are appropriate to mass struggles, to sharp confrontations. We need to ensure that these ways of organising provide maximum democracy, real active participation by the mass of women. We cannot just hope that small groups will 'come together' in ready-made agreement. We have to find ways of handling differing views and still retain our cohesion, of being confident that decisions taken are likely to be acted on