



Fightback at the LPYS conference

ition are in a minority, and as such are not easily accepted by the middle ground. But they represent the only two internally consistent perspectives for women's liberation.

Many feminists see themselves as 'revolutionary' — to indicate that they are not just concerned with reforms to ease women's position, that formal equality is not enough, that a fundamental upheaval is necessary to shake up the old ideas, to put human relationships on a new footing, to ensure that equal rights before the law are backed up by the material, social and psychological prerequisites for real equality and liberation. In this we concur.

But, for most feminists, revolution is one thing — proletarian revolution quite another, especially if the centrality of the class struggle means that feminism should direct itself towards, and aim to base itself on, working class women. Perhaps unable to envisage a socialist revolution in which working class women play a central part to claim their rights as workers, as women, and as people, such feminists simply fear that women's concerns and energies will just be dissolved into the class struggle. They prefer to hold out the perspective of women's liberation as a kind of 'separate but equal' struggle, going on parallel to the class struggle.

This is understandable as a reaction to many bad experiences women have had in trying to organise in the labour movement, and indeed with some left groups. But it avoids the central question: what sort of a revolution, and what sort of a society, will issue from this 'separate but equal' struggle? The only content a 'feminist revolution' can have outside of class struggle and socialist revolution is a radical feminist sexual holocaust.

The Labour Movement

GIVEN THE PRESENT state of the labour movement, there is some justification for the fears of many feminists that a class struggle perspective will simply swallow up women's specific demands. It is male-dominated; its organisational practice (when and how meetings take place, bureaucratic procedures etc) serves to exclude women from participation because it takes no account of the needs created by domestic and childcare responsibilities that still rest on women. The prevailing attitudes are sexist, making women feel either that they are invisible or that they stick out like a sore thumb. Its priorities are male-defined, according much greater emphasis to the economic interests of male, skilled white workers than to women or other oppressed, less easily organised sections, limiting itself to issues of wages and conditions that concern them and missing those issues that are vital to women and crucial to their ability to organise.

But should we just give up on the labour movement because of this?

That would be passive, fatalistic resignation. It ignores

the fact that women, especially working class women who are the majority, *cannot* opt out of the class struggle. We can choose to be passive victims of it or active fighters to change our conditions, but class society and class oppression will not simply go away because we choose to ignore it or not 'concentrate all our energies' on it. And as the present Tory attacks show, the crisis of class society is deepening and there will be less and less chance of closing our eyes to it.

It is fundamentally pessimistic to say: here we are, we're going to change the world, free ourselves from millennia of oppression, eradicate mountains of prejudice, but we can't tackle the labour movement, we'll get swamped.

But we *are* the labour movement, at least a very substantial section of it, and have a damn sight more right to our ideas and needs than the jargon-ridden officials who sit on it. Millions of women *are* in unions, simply to defend their basic interests (and some women, like those at Chix or Grunwicks, go through bitter struggles for the right to organise); millions of women vote Labour and see it as their party. It is already our movement in the sense that (women comprise a large part of it: the point is to *make it our movement* in the real sense, in that it takes up our concerns and fights for our interests.

But it will take a fight. *Fightback* can make a start by helping to coordinate those feminists already active as individuals in their unions, Labour Parties, trades councils etc. How we organise together need not in the least be dictated by how the labour movement as a whole functions: it may be as issue campaigns, small groups to help women gain confidence and learn to be more assertive in union meetings, autonomous caucuses organised either by union or by workplace or both, day-schools and workshops to exchange experiences, etc.

The answer to those who fear that the aims of the women's movement would get lost or stifled if it turned its energies towards the labour movement is that, on the contrary, we would be in a position to gain millions more women for the struggle. In transforming the labour movement for our needs, we could call on the support of all those whose interests it is to open up the labour movement to real participation by the mass of its members.

In the Labour Party there is already a struggle going on for greater accountability, more control by the membership, to turn it into a party that can articulate and fight for the real interests of its members. The women's movement has a lot to contribute in showing how particular ways of organising can militate against women's participation. And the entry into the struggle of substantial numbers of radical left-wing women intent on smashing hierarchies could tip the balance against the Callaghans and Heales.

Does organising in the labour movement mean we have to drop issues of specifically sexual oppression because they're 'personal' and that we only concentrate on 'big' issues of wages, jobs and pensions? The answer is, only if we accept the right of male bureaucrats to define what the labour movement is about. It exists to defend the conditions and forward the interests of all workers. Our right to organise, participate, even our right to work in the first place, are dependent on a whole range of other things.

The present attacks on the welfare state, the social services, the threat to whole communities such as Corby and South Wales, is forcing the labour movement to the realisation that the interests of the working class cannot be narrowly encapsulated by just the question of wages and conditions at work. It is beginning to accept that the fate of the unemployed, the young and old and sick, dependents or wage-earners or claimants, are its responsibility too. With the anti-Corrie campaign we have started to win the argument that 'personal' questions like the right to decide when and if to have children are also class questions.

Nor should we have to buy our right to organise in the labour movement at the cost of putting up with sexist treatment. We have a right to be there and to put forward our views. It is the male chauvinists who should be forced to explain why they think they have a right to abuse sections of the labour movement just because they're women.

If *Fightback for Women's Rights* can mount a strong campaign along these lines — challenging the existing hierarchies, helping to turn bits of the labour movement outwards to join up with struggles of the women's movement, and constructing bridges and signposts to show women ways to get into and organise together inside the labour movement — it could open up whole new territories for the women's movement.