

---

# **Revolutionary Trotskyist League Marxist Pamphlet Series**

## **No. 4 — THE STRUGGLE AGAINST WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN THE 90'S: A WORKING CLASS PERSPECTIVE**

"There can be no socialist revolution unless very many working women take a big part in it."  
(V.I. Lenin, Speech to the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women, Nov. 1918, *Collected Works*, vol. 28, p. 180)



### **Introduction**

The Revolutionary Trotskyist League's intentions in producing this document on women's oppression are twofold: first, to address the predominant conditions affecting working class and poor women in the United States today, and second, to use our program to identify what the objective goals should be for overcoming this oppression. One of the aims of our organization is to show working class women that their struggle for equality should not be oriented toward the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois feminist movement.<sup>1</sup> Rather, because their oppression, which is now highly developed under imperialism, *began with and is rooted in class society*, their participation in the struggle against that oppression needs to have a clear class character for any chance of genuine, lasting effectiveness. Real solutions will only be found when men and women stand together in an anti-capitalist movement.

The question that has split much of the left in the United States is just exactly where to start to build and what tactical program to implement around the struggles of women. The working class itself is divided into various fractions, for example, unionized vs. non-unionized workers, undocumented workers vs. "citizens", domestic laborers vs. industrial workers, white workers vs. those from oppressed ethnic or racial groups, and so forth. These divisions, combined with the extreme illusions in bourgeois democracy that exist in the United States, fre-

---

<sup>1</sup> We recognize that the feminist movement is not monolithic and that there is a wide variety of philosophical currents in modern feminism. The term "feminism" is used in this document to refer to all ideologies—and the political and social movements based on these ideologies—which (1) view male dominance or "patriarchy" as the sole or primary root cause of women's oppression, and (2) put women's issues rather than class issues at the forefront of social and political activism.

quently cause even the most militant workers to focus on limited, sometimes single-issue causes. Consistent with this tendency, the concerns that women rally around in the United States have historically been raised under the cross-class feminist banner, in a women's-issues oriented movement in which the class lines are blurred. Feminism's cross-class orientation has led countless women militants down blind alleys to superficial reforms that cannot benefit working class women, while the economic and social roots of women's oppression go untouched. As women, particularly working class women, suffer ever greater attacks on their economic opportunities, reproductive rights, and standard of living, it is absolutely crucial that they make a break from cross-class reformist politics and turn to the proletarian solution.

### 1. The Situation of American Women in the 90's

Lenin remarked as follows to a conference of working women in Moscow in September 1919:

"We see that equality is proclaimed in all democratic republics but in the civil laws and in laws on the rights of women—those that concern their position in the family and divorce—we see inequality and the humiliation of women at every step . . . . [W]e mean that the woman should not, unlike the man, be oppressed because of her position in the family. *You all know that even when women have full [legal] rights, they still remain factually downtrodden because all housework is left to them.*" (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 30, pp. 42-43, emphasis added)

The legal inequality of women which prevailed in Lenin's time has almost entirely disappeared in the United States today. Nevertheless, as he so perceptively noted, this has *not* resulted in women's emancipation from being "factually downtrodden." Despite all the glowing pictures of progress painted by the ruling class, women in the United States today—especially working class women—are no closer to meaningful, *genuine* equality with men than they were a generation or more ago. The ruling class loves to point out that more and more yuppie women (that is, the privileged ladies of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie) are reaching top executive positions in capitalist corporations—even achieving parity in pay with their male counterparts! Needless to say, this picture in no way describes the condition of the majority of women in the United States. Women in North America are still generally worse off than men, and not only in terms of income, which of course continues to lag behind.

Working class women are still denied important opportunities available to male workers, including organizing into trade unions, which even in the 90's remains easier for men to achieve. As in other western imperialist nations, the vast majority of America's women are working in the lowest-paid jobs, with 75% of all women making less than \$20,000 per year. But at the same time, it is not

just the fact that women earn 66¢ for every dollar a man makes, and women of color make only 58¢ for every man's dollar.<sup>2</sup> For working women, it is also a question of spending, on average, 20% of earned income on child care costs, while at the same time being denied access to adequate family planning services. And it is a question of facing, on a daily basis, extensive sexual discrimination, harassment and stereotyping by the bosses in the workplace. Black women in particular, are viciously stereotyped as dimwits who have too many kids, never want to do any work, and would rather be living on welfare anyway! Sexist and racist sentiments such as these are constantly reflected and reinforced by Hollywood movies, network T.V., and the media as a whole.

Of course, women continue to be unpaid domestic housekeepers. In addition, women workers play a very important role for the ruling class as a reserve army of the unemployed, brought into the workforce when labor is scarce, and laid off as soon as the economy declines. And today this is exactly what is taking place, as disproportionately huge numbers of women are laid off, fired or forced into temporary work with the deepening capitalist crisis.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Class Society and Women's Oppression

In a word: despite superficial legal equality, women in the United States today *continue to be oppressed* and basically treated as "second class citizens." This picture sums up what we, as revolutionary Marxists, refer to as the systematic social oppression of women under capitalism. But as Marxists, we take this characterization an important step further. As explained later in this document, we see the roots of women's oppression in the capitalist system itself and its social unit, the nuclear family. We understand that the material basis for women's oppression, and all oppression, is capitalist exploitation, and ultimately class society itself. We fundamentally disagree with the majority of feminists, both radical and bourgeois feminists, who view women's oppression as *primarily a gender-based question and not a class-based one*, and therefore conclude that women are oppressed not (or not only) by the male-dominated capitalist class, but by "male power" (patriarchy), or even men in general. For the RTL, because women's oppression is rooted in class society, it has to be fought with class-based, not gender-based, methods; only the struggle of the working class can end women's oppression. It is for this reason that we emphasize that electing more women into government positions, including Democratic Party candidates, or encouraging women to climb to the top of the corporate ladder, *will never positively impact the oppression of working women*

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau (1992).

<sup>3</sup> See "The Irreversible Decline of US Capitalism," *International Trotskyist* No. 5 (Spring 1992).

in the United States.

While we trace the roots of oppression to class society, we nonetheless recognize that women's oppression under capitalism is not restricted to the working class. Although the oppression of women workers in capitalist society intensifies with their exploitation,<sup>4</sup> the two phenomena are not always directly related. While a bourgeois woman is not generally exploited, and not necessarily oppressed in every particular case, bourgeois women in general *are* subjected to a certain degree of oppression—mostly because of their social role as women in the ruling class. This explains, for example, why there have been very few female Lee Iaccocas or Henry Kissingers, that is, very few women (even bourgeois women) in the top positions of leadership of the ruling class. We also recognize that there have been many historical examples of non-proletarian movements that have revolted against the bourgeoisie in response to their oppression (for instance, the San Francisco Harvey Milk riots in the 1970's).

Having said all this, however, it is essential to recognize that *a bourgeois woman and a working class woman do not suffer oppression equally*. Women in capitalist society who are not exploited, or less exploited, tend to be less severely oppressed. Much of the household toil of a bourgeois woman can be passed along to the maids, nannies and housekeepers that she employs in her household. Her bourgeois privileges help to offset much of the oppression to which working class women are subject. A clear illustration of this, by way of example, is a comparison of the oppression of a wealthy businessman's wife and the maid that she employs. First, the fact that both of these women are oppressed by capitalism, does not make them, as the feminists would have us believe, "sisters." The maid actually has more in common with her husband than she does with the bourgeois woman she works for. While both the rich woman and the maid are chained to the oppression of the nuclear family, *only the maid has a direct, class interest in fighting to overthrow the capitalist system*. Second, while the bourgeois lady is able to spend much of her time on leisure activities, the maid may have to work ten, twelve or more hours just to make ends meet, as well as doing the household chores for her own family. Because she has no access to a union, the maid is unlikely to have a health plan, paid vacations, accessible child care or any of the other rights that the bourgeois woman takes for granted. Finally, if the maid is an undocumented worker, she has the added burden of anti-immigrant racist repression—not to mention being denied the fundamental right to vote!

Thus, while it is true that women in all classes of society are oppressed (though in varying degrees), women of all classes are not automatically anti-capitalist. For example,

in the Russian Revolution in 1917, the women of the poor peasantry and the working class supported the Bolshevik struggle for power, but the privileged peasant and petty-bourgeois women—especially those who were organized into the mass feminist organizations—*opposed* the Bolshevik revolution. Particularly in an imperialist country like the United States, women in the bourgeoisie and in many sectors of the petty-bourgeoisie (including lawyers, doctors, business managers, and other "professionals") *have a vested interest in defending the capitalist system*. Social oppression in and of itself is not adequate to revolutionize anyone. Moreover, it does not follow automatically that the more oppressed a person is in society, the more revolutionary they will be. For us in the RTL, the struggle against women's oppression is part and parcel of the struggle against capitalism. The profit system will not be abolished without the struggle for women's liberation, and women will only achieve true liberation through the overthrow of the profit system, through socialist revolution. However, *socialism will never be achieved through the unity of women of all classes, but by the united struggle of the working class, that is, the class that represents and leads the most exploited and oppressed sectors of society*.

### 3. The Roots of Women's Subjugation

Women have not always been domestic slaves. They have not always been regarded as submissive, inferior beings whose only (or principal) role in society is child rearing and domestic toil. The oppression of women is very clearly a *social* question, not an eternal fact of biology. As Frederick Engels showed over a century ago in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the oppression of women originated with the emergence of class society and private property, and the dissolution of kinship (clan) society.

Clan society was based on communal ownership and hunting-gathering, in which the women were responsible for providing the necessities of life for the community. They did this through food collecting, horticulture, subsistence agriculture, herbalism and the production of clothing. In these classless societies, women were independent, highly respected and relatively sexually free. However, as the clan began rearing animals and cultivating land, it started to produce a surplus of food and livestock, which could then be stored or traded with other clans. Over a prolonged period of time, a class emerged to take control of this surplus: a ruling class. Because it was the men who hunted and became responsible for raising the livestock, they came to dominate class society. The patriarchs took control of the communal property and also seized from women the control of their fertility, creating the monogamous family.

<sup>4</sup> The term "exploitation" is used in this document strictly in its Marxist sense, i.e., to refer to the appropriation by capitalists of surplus value created by the labor of workers.

"The overthrow of mother right was the *world historical defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude;

she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. . . . The establishment of the exclusive supremacy of the man shows its effects first in the patriarchal family, which now emerges as an intermediate form. . . . The original meaning of the word 'family' (*familia*) is not that compound of sentimentality and domestic strife which forms the ideal of the present-day philistine; among the Romans it did not at first even refer to the married pair and their children but only to the slaves. *Famulus* means domestic slave, and *familia* is the total number of slaves belonging to one man." (F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, pp. 120-121 (emphasis in original))

"[Monogamy] was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. . . . The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male." (*Id.*, pp. 128-129)

Through the patriarchal family and the institution of monogamous marriage, men in the earliest class societies safeguarded their property by ensuring that it was passed to their offspring and only their offspring. By taking control of women's fertility, these early class societies were able to reduce women to the role of child rearer and domestic slave. The domestic enslavement of women was thus systematized. These basic features of women's oppression continued through barbarism, slave society and feudalism.

As Engels made very clear in his writings on the origin of the family, *the oppression of women originated with the emergence of class society*. For Engels, the oppression of women can be traced back to the division of primitive society into classes that evolved with the accumulation of wealth, property and social surplus. Under slavery and feudalism, female monogamy continued, and production was carried out by the whole family unit within the household. Only with the rise of capitalism did the nuclear family first appear specifically as a unit of reproduction of labor power, as it exists today. The household was replaced by the factory as the principal locus of social production, and legislation was introduced to restrict the involvement of women in industrial production. As a result women became completely responsible for domestic labor. With the arrival of capitalism, the oppression of women reached a whole new level of development.

Why this is a central question for Marxists lies in the fact that *only* with the abolition of class society can the material basis for the oppression of women—and all oppression—be eliminated. In other words, for the RTL, the socialist revolution will prepare the ground for the eradication of oppression, once and for all. What is

key here is that, unlike "socialist feminists" and centrists like the Freedom Socialist Party and the Revolutionary Workers League, we believe that women's oppression, and all oppression, has a completely *material basis*, namely the material privileges that originated with class society. Even though, as previously discussed, oppression does affect women in all social classes to some extent under capitalism, it is nonetheless true that a cross-class alliance of women cannot eliminate that oppression. *Only the abolition of capitalism—i.e., the establishment of a socialist, classless society—can end women's oppression, because that is the only way to destroy its material basis.*

#### 4. Capitalism and the Nuclear Family

Under current bourgeois laws, women in the United States have generally been granted *formally* equal rights, both inside and outside of the workplace (provided, of course, that they are not undocumented immigrant workers!). For instance, American women legally have the same rights as men to work, vote in elections, get a divorce, own property, and so on. With a few isolated exceptions, such as the prohibition against women serving in active military combat, the laws of the United States do not *officially* deny women equal rights with men. There has even been liberal legislation enacted by the ruling class to "protect" the rights of women in the workplace, such as the 1963 Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But behind the thin veneer of bourgeois democratic "equality," women in America continue to be denied equal treatment, to be treated as second class citizens, to be *socially unequal*. They continue to experience numerous forms of *informal* discrimination in all areas of their lives. It is precisely for this reason that the vast majority of women in the United States are not working in highly paid jobs. (In fact, 75% of American women make less than \$20,000 per year!) The discrimination faced by women, though informal, does not take place not in an arbitrary or episodic way, but in a *systematic manner*, both in the workplace and in other areas of social life, and results in women being denied rights and opportunities that are more easily available to men. As was pointed out in section 2 of this document, the oppression of women is so deep-rooted in capitalist society that even most *bourgeois women* are denied full equality with bourgeois men, for instance in their ability to reach positions of top leadership in the ruling class.

Why is this? Because of the *role* that women play in capitalist society—namely their role as *domestic slaves within the nuclear family*. The fact that the labor needed to care for workers and their children on a daily basis is provided by the nuclear family, free of charge and overwhelmingly (even today) by women, is not just a coincidence of culture. It plays a *fundamental role in the economics of the capitalist profit system*. To maintain this economic benefit to itself, capitalism has a vested inter-

est in subjecting women to the social oppression that goes with the nuclear family system. This is the root of the oppression that working class women (and all women, to some extent) experience under capitalism. The domestic slavery of women, not simply the fact that they are born with a different biology, is the material basis for their *oppression*: that is, the *denial* of women's full equality, of women's equal rights, which takes place in capitalist society.

The nuclear family plays a central role in producing the next generation of workers and providing capitalism with its most important commodity: labor power (that is, the capacity of workers to perform work). Under capitalism, workers can only survive by selling their labor power to the capitalists. For their part, the bosses are interested only in making use of this capacity by employing workers to produce commodities at a profit. They take no interest in how workers' labor power is replenished. The workers are paid a wage, and are left to their own devices as to how they accomplish the tasks necessary to return themselves to work the next day fed, rested, healthy, and ready to serve the boss again. Under the nuclear family system, working class women play a crucial economic and social role in providing, *free of charge to the bosses*, the essential but tedious services, such as cleaning, cooking, food shopping and child care, which are necessary to replenish labor power and reproduce it (by raising children). These services constitute a form of private labor that lies outside

social production. The bourgeoisie literally saves *billions* of dollars by making the atomized nuclear family, rather than society as a whole, responsible for the care of workers, children, the elderly and the sick.

Importantly, it is because women's labor in the home is unpaid that her labor in the workforce is undervalued. This is reflected in the fact that, even today, every aspect of women's lives is influenced by capitalist society's expectations about their role in the family. The kinds of jobs most commonly available to working class women (food service, cleaning, nursing, child care); their pay and working conditions (often part-time or temporary work); their inability to obtain promotions—all of these are based on the assumption that a woman's top priority (and her place) is in the home.

The capitalists have no interest in drawing housework into social production or making it more efficient—there is no profit in it. As far as the ruling class is concerned, the productivity of work in the home is of no real consequence, *as long as it gets done, and it gets done free of charge*. Thus, in spite of the advent of the computer age and capitalist "high technology," housework and domestic life remain a slavish drudgery for working class women. While it is true that "labor-saving" domestic appliances, such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines and microwave ovens, have cut the amount of time that women have to spend on this stultifying labor, these devices—

which were invented and produced in order to make a profit, not in order to relieve women of their oppression—have not fundamentally changed the tedious, time-consuming, exhausting nature of domestic toil. This is in large part because the burden of domestic work still basically falls on the back of one person in most families. In addition, in the 90's it takes two incomes to maintain a decent standard of living, so most women have a job on top of their domestic duties, and most workers, including working class women, often have to work longer hours to make ends meet. As a result, working class women have less time for housework, and often none at all for leisure activities. In short, it is the *profit system* which is the source of the oppression of working class women (indeed all women), and not the men in the nuclear family, or men generally.

As the capitalist crisis deepens, the nuclear family becomes more and more a prison house of abuse and enslavement—especially for working women and children. According to a study conducted at Rutgers University, one out of four suicide attempts



No job — and without childcare, no way to look for one

by women is preceded by abuse in the home. Domestic violence against women is promoted by capitalism in at least three different ways. First, capitalism alienates working class men from their labor and forces them to live under conditions of hardship and subservience which leave them frustrated and angry. Second, capitalism deliberately fosters in both men and women, through the nuclear family system, the deluded belief that abuse of women at the hands of their male family members and companions is normal and acceptable behavior. Finally, the economic conditions created by capitalism for working class women leave many such women without the economic means to escape an abusive situation. In short, domestic violence against women is not a problem of "patriarchy"; it has *direct material roots* in the capitalist system.

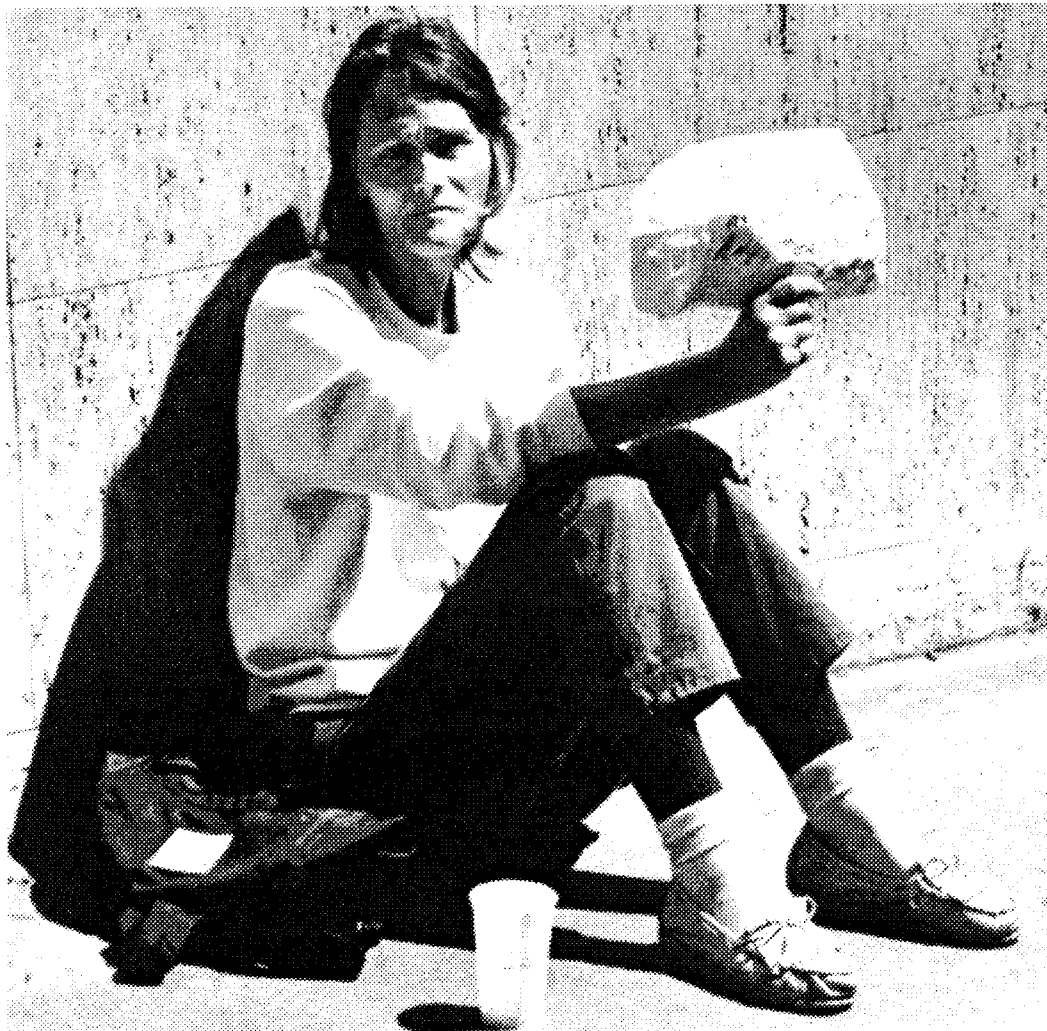
The family, as an institution that is oppressive to working class women, and works directly to the benefit of the bosses, also provides *working class men* with some real material advantages *relative to working class women*. This is not because male workers conspire together to oppress women, but because the role of women in the family

indirectly endows men with material privileges, such as lighter burdens of domestic chores. But even this is greatly overshadowed by the oppressiveness of the nuclear family itself, and the tremendous alienation that working class women—and men—suffer within this social prison house. The nuclear family plays a major role in the perpetuation of capitalism's oppression and exploitation of the proletariat, and male workers have an objective material interest in fighting alongside women for the socialization of housework, child care and health care, and the abolition of the profit system itself.

The position of some sectors of the left for "wages for housework" is not a progressive working class demand. This is because this demand calls for compensating individual women (and some men) for performing housework on an individual basis, and not on the basis of organizing domestic workers and making them part of the working class's social and political organizations. More importantly, if the "wages for housework" demand were realized (which in reality the capitalists will never agree to do, because it would be too expensive for them), it would only serve to *reinforce* the private nature of

domestic work and the atomization of women in the nuclear family. In fact, this position capitulates to the old bourgeois notion that "a woman's place is in the home." In contrast, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky all saw clearly that only by *socializing* domestic work—that is, making it the responsibility of society as a whole, as part of a larger socialist economic system—can women be truly liberated from their oppression:

"We can already see . . . that to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The



Another victim of the capitalist system: a woman with AIDS is left to die in the street

RTL photo



emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time." (F. Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 221)

"Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman [enacted by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution], she continues to be a *domestic slave*, because *petty housework* crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery. The real *emancipation of women*, 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." (V.I. Lenin, "A Great Beginning," *Collected Works*, vol. 29, p. 429, emphasis in original)

"Owing to her work in the house, the woman is still in a difficult position. To effect her complete emancipation and make her the equal of the man it is necessary for the national economy to be socialized and for women to participate in common productive labor. Then women will occupy the same position as men. . . . We are setting up model institutions . . . that will emancipate women from housework . . . [and] liberate women from their positions as household slaves. . . . [T]his activity will bring about a complete change in their position as compared with what it was under the old, capitalist society." (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 30, pp. 43-44)

"The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called 'family hearth'—that archaic, stuffy and stagnant institution in which the woman of the toiling classes performs galley labor from childhood to death. The place of the family as a shut-in petty enterprise was to be occupied, according to the plans, by a finished system of social care and accommodation: maternity houses, crèches, kindergartens, schools, social dining rooms, social laundries, first-aid stations, hospitals, . . . , etc. The complete absorption of the housekeeping functions of the family by institutions of the socialist society . . . was to bring to woman, and thereby to the loving couple, a real liberation from the thousand-year-old fetters." (L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 144)

In the meantime, however, the working class cannot simply put forward the demand to "abolish the family" or "smash the family," as proposed by the centrist International Trotskyist Committee (ITC), the international grouping of which the United States section is the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL). As Trotsky pointed out decades ago, "You cannot 'abolish' the family; you have to replace it." (*Id.*, p. 145) As far as socialists are concerned, the family structure cannot simply be "smashed." It has to

be *replaced* by a higher social structure, which in turn cannot simply be created out of thin air, without the overthrow of the capitalist system, the seizure of power by the working class, and the establishment of a planned economy! In fact, even after the socialist revolution, the family will not be abolished overnight; it may take several generations, and the development of socialism itself, before the nuclear family as we know it will cease to exist. Unlike the RWL, revolutionaries do not march into the workers' movement and demand, in an ultimatum way, that the family be "smashed." Today, revolutionary Marxists fight within the working class for women's liberation by organizing around demands such as: free abortion and contraception on demand; free, high-quality, 24-hour child care in every community and workplace; and a labor party, based on the unions, with a fighting class struggle program.

It is true that the "classical" nuclear family of the 40's and 50's is no longer the predominant *form* in which the family exists today. But it is quite wrong to conclude from this (as have many liberal and "socialist" feminists like the Freedom Socialist Party<sup>5</sup>) that we are witnessing the demise of this capitalist institution and the creation of "alternatives" to the nuclear family. On the contrary, the fact that more women are bringing up children single-handedly (often while working outside the home at the same time!) *further concentrates* the burden of domestic toil and child rearing on one person, instead of two. In reality, this only serves to aggravate the oppression of the woman in this "super-nuclear" family, regardless of the number of "labor-saving" devices she has in the house! The crisis of capitalism itself, with its accompanying unemployment, low pay and poor housing, is responsible for breaking up millions of families every year—and working class women are the ones who are taking the brunt of this crisis. This is hardly a progressive step in the direction of a new, less oppressive family structure!

There is also, especially among the educated petty-bourgeoisie, an increasing number of "liberated" two-parent heterosexual families in which the man and the woman both hold jobs and share the housework more or less equally (usually less, as old oppressions are hard to break!). In such families, the specific oppression of the woman is reduced, at least within the home. However, the oppression inherent in the nuclear family *system* still remains, because the social cost of reproducing labor power is still borne by *individual workers*—now two instead of one—instead of by the capitalists whom it ultimately benefits. It is also true that, at least in certain more "enlightened" communities,<sup>6</sup> more lesbian and gay cou-

<sup>5</sup> See *Sparkplugs of Labor*, Radical Women (1990). (Radical Women is an arm of the Freedom Socialist Party.)

<sup>6</sup> Even in the 90's, there are still many parts of the United States where a loving mother can lose custody of her child solely because she is a lesbian. This underscores the lengths to which capitalism will go to enforce the heterosexual nuclear family model, due to its vested interest in maintaining the family as a source of free services for the reproduction of workers and their labor power. (See further discussion below.)

ples are raising children together. While liberals and centrists tend to view the "gay family," which usually departs from the traditional gender-based division of household labor, as a progressive alternative, a step forward compared to the traditional family, it is the duty of communists to dispel such illusions. The gay family, as a family, is subject to the same social pressures as its straight equivalent, and, like the "liberated" heterosexual family, is subject to the same oppressive features as any other nuclear family.

As already noted, even with "modern conveniences," housework remains a very labor-intensive form of toil that acts to separate women from social labor and isolate them in the home, away from other workers and from social life in general. Even if a woman works outside the home, as most do today, her duties within the family tend to restrict her ability to participate in after-work social interaction with other workers. In the isolation of the home, working class women become atomized and subject to the pressures of bourgeois ideology (e.g., via TV and the press) and all of its backward, reactionary features. In this setting, bourgeois morality, religion, and political conservatism can all find fertile ground to germinate. At the same time, domestic slavery also serves to obstruct the participation of working women in the class struggle and in politics in general. Even something as basic as union activity can be a major challenge for a woman worker. Thus, without doubt, the nuclear family serves as a very important transmission belt for bourgeois ideology (e.g. over gender roles and sexuality)—and not least of all to women themselves, who then, in their capacity as principal caregivers to the young, pass it along to their children.

It is thus within the nuclear family that the oppression of children and youth, and of lesbians and gay men, is firmly rooted. The family serves to mold girls and young women into their roles as mothers and housekeepers, often in the most repressive ways. Within the isolation of the family, traditional religions such as Judaism, Catholicism and Islam can have a particularly damaging social and psychological effect on young people. For example, under the capitalist nuclear family system, many young Latina women are turned into highly-abused maids and sexual slaves of their husbands with the blessing of Catholic ideology. Lesbians and gay men, because they do not conform to the reproductive and sex-based roles of the nuclear family, are viewed as a threat to the ruling class, and as a result come under constant psychological (and sometimes physical) assault.<sup>7</sup> The stark fact that lesbian and gay sex is openly non-reproductive directly challenges the bourgeois "norm" of the heterosexual, monogamous, child-bearing family. This provides some in-

sight into exactly why the nuclear family is so *vital* to the capitalist class. Put bluntly, without this social unit, capitalism would not be able to sustain itself profitably; it would not be able to endure.

The role of women within the nuclear family also provides the basis for the repression and devaluation of women's sexuality. The stereotype of the "faithful," "loving" wife is emphasized by bourgeois ideology because a stable family unit in the working class is essential for the reproduction of labor power. As noted earlier, for the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie, monogamy is also important for the transfer of wealth via inheritance in class society. There is thus a material basis for the infamous "double standard," which tolerates nothing short of monogamy for women in the nuclear family, while making it acceptable for the man to occasionally "sow his wild oats."

"Monogamy arose from the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of a single individual—a man—and from the need to bequeath this wealth to the children of that man and of no other. For this purpose, the monogamy of the woman was required, not that of the man, so this monogamy of the woman did not in any way interfere with open or concealed polygamy on the part of the man." (F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 138)

Thus, women's role in the nuclear family system, by requiring their monogamy but not that of men, implies that women's sexuality is a commodity which is properly at the disposal of men. As a result, despite some changes brought about by the "sexual revolution" of the 60's and the reformist feminism of the 70's, women's sexuality remains degraded and devalued in capitalist society. It is the subject of a constant barrage of moral panics over "unwed" mothers (especially "welfare" mothers), teenage promiscuity, pornography, AIDS, and of course, lesbianism. The hysteria created by these panics not only serves to strengthen the oppression of women, but also to serve as a handy diversion for the ruling class to use to distract the masses in the face of intense capitalist crisis.

The degradation of women's sexuality also plays a major role in instigating and legitimizing the sexual abuse that women suffer at the hands of the bosses at work (sexual harassment, etc.) and the rape and violence with which they are confronted off the job. Many feminists regard superficial expressions of sexism, such as pornography and advertising (and even prostitution), as the root of violence against women. This is, in fact, nothing but a form of moral panic itself. Socialists are opposed to calling on the state to ban or censor pornography, sexually explicit images or even sexist advertising. This is because the state, as the armed political wing of the ruling class, is the real perpetuator of women's oppression—not X-rated movies, Playboy, or Calvin Klein. For communists, it is never acceptable to call on the bourgeois state to suppress

<sup>7</sup> A 1992 study in New York City showed that gay and lesbian teenagers are three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers.





**Militant women workers are seen as a big threat by the bosses**

any kind of literature or imagery—including pornography—because the power to do so will only be used by the ruling class to further suppress the political expression and democratic rights of the working class and the oppressed.

As Marxists, we support the right of working women to be free from sexist treatment and the display of degrading images by their fellow workers. However, we call on the advanced workers themselves, not the bosses or their legal system, to stop these practices—not through force, but by raising working class men's consciousness about the role sexism plays in the bosses' system of oppression and exploitation, and by fostering solidarity between men and women workers through joint participation in struggle.<sup>8</sup> When working class women are assured of good jobs at decent wages, they will no longer be coerced by economic need into selling their bodies or cooperating in the production of demeaning sexual images. When socialism brings true equality and solidarity between men and women, degrading pornography will be entirely replaced by healthy erotic art.

## **5. Women's Militancy in the Working Class Today**

Notwithstanding women's traditional role in the fam-

ily, in recent decades the number of women in the United States workforce has grown quite rapidly. Today, women make up almost 50% of the entire workforce. But a large proportion of these women, especially those who are single mothers, are now living below the poverty level. Working class women, in particular women of color, have been disproportionately hard hit by the capitalist economic crisis of the 80's and 90's (euphemistically referred to by the ruling class as "the recession"). The massive union-busting assault on organized labor, from PATCO to Pittston, from the NLRB to NAFTA, has brought down the living standards of millions of working class women.

Even the "official statistics" of the bourgeoisie reveal that the plight of single mothers is horrifying. In the so-called "richest country in the world" half of all black single parent families are living on less than \$14,000 per year.<sup>9</sup> While some of these women have been "fortunate" enough to find low-paying jobs in the service sector or in light industry (non-union, of course), millions have been faced with no choice but to live on near-starvation levels of government aid (welfare). This has been aggravated many times over as a result of the huge cuts in social services that have been implemented by bourgeois governments at the city, state and federal budget levels.

The ruling class, with its usual unmatched hypocrisy, dares to accuse women forced to live on welfare—especially black single women—of "wrecking the economy" for the "rest" of us!! In fact, it is precisely because of the capitalists' budget cutbacks that thousands of schools, social service programs, and hospitals have been closed

<sup>8</sup> The recent experience of women in the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico is instructive in this regard. Women play an equal role in the EZLN, both in the leadership and on the front lines. As a result, their male comrades have gained respect for their companions in struggle, and have shed many of the backward ideas which their culture had inculcated in them.

<sup>9</sup> Ries and Stone, *The American Woman* 1992-93.

down or cut to the bone, forcing working women back into the home (or into the streets, as low-cost housing becomes harder and harder to find), with the added burden of caring for the young, the elderly, the sick and the disabled. This is further underlined by the fact that the United States is the only imperialist country in the world which has almost no socialized child care whatsoever, a very clear measure of *how backward this capitalist nation is*. In response to the austerity attacks of the Democrats and Republicans, militants in the labor movement must organize to fight around demands such as: No public service cuts, no layoffs! Open the government budget books to full inspection by the workers! Billions of government dollars to provide all needed social services! Work or full pay for all, at union wages, based on a sliding scale of hours! Open the unions to the most oppressed!

Although (or perhaps because) working class women have been hard hit, in recent years growing numbers of them have been at the forefront of leading strikes and organizing unions. Today, over 30% of women working in the public sector and in manufacturing have been organized into unions such as SEIU and the UAW.<sup>10</sup> While the industrial proletariat remains predominantly male, it is important to note that strategically important service industries, such as telecommunications and banking, are now heavily staffed by women workers. It is also significant that a very high proportion of women working in these industries work with computers, and that a growing number of them are organizing into unions like SEIU around the country.<sup>11</sup>

However, women still are not adequately represented among the official leadership of organized labor. SEIU, for example, is a union with a high female membership, but has disproportionately little representation of women in its top leadership bodies. As far as the AFL-CIO is concerned, it was not until 1980 that a woman (CLUW president Joyce Miller<sup>12</sup>) was appointed for the first time to the 34-seat executive council! As a whole, the union bureaucracy in the United States has largely *ignored* organizing industries with a predominantly female workforce, and this has not been greatly affected by CLUW's existence. Outside the public sector, most women clerical workers remain unorganized. And in unionized industries, most women continue to be segregated in terms of job classifications and actually suffer the same disadvantage in income relative to men as do unorganized women. This kind of wage discrimination is maintained by discriminatory job descriptions,<sup>13</sup> and by exclu-

sion of women from the more skilled jobs. Additionally, the benefits packages that have been negotiated in union contracts have tended to be oriented towards male workers, and do not meet needs such as daycare. As a result, the highly exploitative and oppressive working conditions of women workers in the United States have spurred many of them to organize strike action.

There have been many examples in the last decade of strikes in which women have played militant, leadership roles. At Yale University in 1984, the technical and clerical workers of the Federation of University Employees led the first private sector strike over pay equity in the United States. The strikers were backed up by organized male workers on the campus. After 10 weeks of picketing the university, the strikers won full pay equity with the male workers, as well as comparable benefit packages. Two years later, in 1986, members of the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants (IFFA) led a militant strike against TWA and its demands for givebacks and concessions. When TWA Chairman Carl Icahn told the members of the IFFA that they could *afford wage cuts* because they were not breadwinners, the women responded by asking Icahn: "Who is going to feed us?"

Between 1985 and 1987, several thousand predominantly Chicana and Mexicana cannery workers carried out a successful strike against Shaw Frozen Foods and Watsonville Canning in the farmlands of California. After a very long, hard-fought battle, which was *opposed* by the bureaucrats of the Teamsters union, Watsonville Canning went bankrupt rather than settle with the strikers. The new owners of the company, however, were desperate to begin running the plant, and made concessions to the workers on union recognition, wages, health and pension benefits and rehiring of strikers. Once again, the male workers in the local community played an important supportive role in this strike, in spite of the backward, sexist influence of the Catholic Church.

Since Watsonville, important struggles have also taken place in the garment industry by members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in New York, and more recently, by sweatshop workers in northern California against subcontractors of the designer clothing manufacturer Jessica McClintock. The so-called "health care" industry has also seen militant strikes by hospital workers and nurses at Kaiser Foundation in northern California, Summit Hospital in Oakland, California, and public health facilities around the country. The Summit strike was significant, because it was not simply over wages and benefits, but also over the right to engage in sympathy strikes and the right to have contracts affecting different hospital unions expire at the same time. At Summit, several unions, including SEIU, ILWU, HERE and OPEIU, united on the picket line. Importantly, the Summit strikers successfully defended their legal right to sympathy strikes, but this was achieved in "exchange" (by agreement of the union bureaucracy) for the layoff of hundreds of hospital workers.

<sup>10</sup> SEIU is the Service Employees International Union; UAW is the United Auto Workers.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau (1992).

<sup>12</sup> Miller's organization, CLUW (Coalition of Labor Union Women), projects the image of an organization which empowers women in the labor movement. In reality, it has acted mainly to further the interests of women in the trade union *bureaucracy*.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in a commercial cleaning operation, women may be called "housekeepers" while men are called "janitors" and receive higher pay for essentially the same work.

Ultimately, however, even the militancy and fighting spirit of rank and file women like these has not been enough to prevent the union bureaucracy from selling out their struggles. Without working class solidarity based on a powerful class struggle program—which must include a break with the Democratic Party—strikes like Summit and Watsonville, and countless others, have no real chance of gaining a lasting victory. In order to reverse the attacks of the bosses and to win their struggles, women workers, and all workers, have to go beyond traditional strike methods, i.e., small, isolated economic strikes. Every strike today has important political ramifications for the working class, and every strike must be politicized, using the method of transitional demands and a class struggle program. Real equality for women in the working class cannot come about without *militant struggle on a joint, integrated, anti-capitalist basis*. It is thus especially important for working class men to support the demands of their sisters in the labor movement and fight for them in a transitional way, for example: Organize the unorganized workers; Open the unions and their leadership (at every level) to women workers; Equal pay and comparable worth for women; Free, quality, round-the-clock child care convenient to the workplace; Free abortion on demand; and so on.

## 6. Working Women's Worldwide Struggle

The struggles of women workers in the United States have followed a similar course to those of their sisters in other imperialist countries of the world. Ironically, the tasks facing women in the ex-workers' states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are very similar to those

faced by women in the imperialist west today, such as mass unemployment, destruction of socialized child care and health care, segregation into low-paid jobs and denial of access to abortion and contraception. These attacks, and worse, are taking place in the former Soviet Union and the former deformed workers' states *as a direct result of capitalist restoration*. Throughout Eastern Europe, for example, the churches are collaborating directly with the restorationist forces in organizing a massive assault on abortion rights. Nowhere is this more the case than in Poland, where the Catholic Church and the parliament are attempting to outlaw abortion altogether.

In the semi-colonies of the so-called "third world," the situation is even worse for working class and peasant women. As a result of imperialist economic domination and under-development of the semi-colonies, women workers in the cities of these areas are subject to conditions of super-exploitation, and peasant women in the countryside must work the land in traditional, labor-intensive ways—often doing so alone because the men in their communities are forced to seek work elsewhere to help their families survive. In both cases this work must be done *in addition* to taking care of the family and the home, often without the aid of even plumbing or electricity, much less the "modern conveniences" available to women in industrialized countries. In addition, as a result of cultural and religious backwardness (veiling, arranged marriages, female circumcision, etc.) and the remnants of feudalism (female slavery, dowries, etc.), the social oppression of women in the semi-colonies is intensified many times over. Worse yet, millions of girls and women in south-east Asia and other semi-colonial areas are sold or forced into entire lives of prostitution in order to

support their parents' families or themselves and their children.

As a result of this enormous burden of oppression and exploitation, women workers and peasants have played a leading role in many of the semi-colonial revolutions, including most recently in Chiapas, Mexico, as well as in Nicaragua, the Philippines, Iran, and Vietnam. In contrast to the pacifist "love and peace" rhetoric of today's bourgeois feminists, working class and peasant women have played important *military* roles in these revolutions, for instance in Nicaragua, where women fought on the front lines against Somoza's dictatorship! Indeed, without the militant working class women's movement in 1917, the Russian Revolution itself might not have succeeded.



Women workers demonstrate for the right to organize before World War One.

## 7. Bolshevism and Feminism

The struggle against women's oppression is a fundamental issue in every country of the world without exception. For Marxists, however, this struggle is inextricably bound up with the overall struggle against capitalism. As with the liberation of other oppressed sectors of society, women's liberation for us is a *class question*; the oppression of women will only be ended when capitalism is overthrown and the working class takes power. In other words, women's liberation is impossible without socialism just as socialism is impossible without women's liberation. Thus, in order for the struggle against women's oppression to be successful, it has to be fought with working class methods and organs of struggle. Women can only be liberated from oppression if proletarian women organize to fight it with a proletarian program of their own, linked to the rest of the working class. *Only proletarian women can lead the struggle that will put an end to women's oppression.* Working class men have to be in the forefront of this struggle, alongside their sisters, organized into a proletarian movement which is based on a militant class struggle program, using the method of transitional demands (see section 10 of this document).

"The Third Congress of the Communist International supports the basic position of revolutionary Marxism that there is no 'special' women's question, nor should there be a special women's movement, and that any alliance between working women and bourgeois feminism or support for the vacillating or clearly right-wing tactics of the social compromisers and opportunists will lead to the weakening of the forces of the proletariat, thereby delaying the great hour of the full emancipation of women." (Third Congress of the Third International, July 1921, reprinted in *Theses Resolutions & Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (Humanities Press, 1980), pp. 215-216.)

As the preceding quotation shows, the position of Lenin, Trotsky, and the Third International before it became dominated by the Stalinists, was explicitly that: (1) *the oppression of women originated with the emergence of class society* and (2) *there is no specific women's movement and no specific women's question.* According to the Theses on Work Amongst Women adopted at the Third Congress of the Third International in 1921 (see *id.*, pp. 212-229), an all-class women's movement would serve as an obstacle to the struggle for socialism and women's true liberation. According to these theses, no strategic alliance was permissible between working class women and bourgeois and petty-bourgeois feminists. This is because, at root, the oppression of women exists because of class society.

Revolutionary Marxists have always pointed out that feminism, in particular bourgeois feminism, poses a real *danger* to the women of the working class. As long ago as 1905, Alexandra Kollontai (who was later to become a

leading figure in the Bolshevik Party) began organizing and leading the struggles of working women in Russia against the Russian ruling class. From the beginning Kollontai understood that feminism represented the politics of the bourgeoisie (with petty-bourgeois variations) within the women's movement. She understood that, in particular, that bourgeois feminist organizations such as the Union for Women's Equality (UWE) were attempting to build a base among working class women in order to tie these women to the politics of the bourgeoisie. At the meetings of the UWE in Petrograd, Kollontai would intervene and attempt to draw the class line between bourgeois feminism and the socialist women's movement.

"Th[e] sudden interest in women's rights created favourable soil for the growth of bourgeois feminism in Russia. The first revolutionary storm gave birth to bourgeois women's political organizations, which tried to unite women of all classes under their narrow feminist banner." (A. Kollontai, *Towards a History of the Working Women's Movement in Russia* (1920), reprinted in *Selected Writings* (Norton, 1977), p. 49) "For the broad mass of working women the conference [the All-Russia Women's Congress in 1908] and the intervention of the working women's group was of great educational significance, for a sharp and distinct line had been drawn between bour-



Kollontai speaking at the Second International Conference of Women Communists in 1921

geois feminism and the proletarian women's movement. . . . It became clear to every thinking working woman that nothing could be expected from the bourgeois feminists." (*Id.*, p. 57) "Access to the ballot box and the deputy's seat is the true goal of the feminist movement. And the more politically conscious of the working women are aware that neither political nor legal equality can finally settle the 'woman question.' As long as a woman has to sell her labour power and suffer capitalist slavery, she will not be a free and independent person . . ." (*Id.*, p. 52)

Unlike the Stalinists and centrist "Trotskyists" of today (see section 8 of this document), Kollontai *never hesitated to denounce feminism, to point out that it was a danger to working class women, and to call it by its true name.* Kollontai called on the women attending UWE meetings to organize themselves against the Russian ruling class around the program of the Bolshevik Party, and to do so independently of the bourgeois leaders of the feminist movement. Again and again, Kollontai emphasized the need for working women to *break politically with feminism.* "During 1905 and 1906 the poison of feminism infected not only the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries but even some active Bolsheviks. At the first large women's meeting held on 10 April 1905 at the Tenishevskaya Institute in St. Petersburg, only two speakers (one of whom was a working woman) dared to raise a voice of dissent against the friendly choir of representatives from the various social groups and political parties. We who were opposed to any bloc with the bourgeois feminists, however temporary, *warned the working women against being carried away by feminism and called on them to defend the single revolutionary worker's banner.*" (*Id.*, p. 51 (emphasis added))

## 8. Modern Feminism and Centrism in the US

The so-called "first wave" of bourgeois feminism with which Kollontai did battle at the beginning of the 20th century was followed, starting in the late 1960's or early 1970's, by a "second wave" which was more petty-bourgeois in social character but which nonetheless, with a few isolated exceptions, remained bourgeois in its political orientation (i.e., its demands did not go beyond the boundaries of what is permissible under capitalism). Unfortunately, the lessons in relation to the women's question which Kollontai and the Bolsheviks understood and applied in the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions were evidently not understood or accepted by the right-wing centrist United Secretariat (USec) and its United States section, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the 60's and 70's. Instead, the SWP and its centrist splits consciously tailed the petty-bourgeois feminist women's liberation movement and the reformist "left" wing of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

The material basis for the "second wave" of feminism was as follows. The two decades after World War II were years of capitalist expansion and rising living standards

in the United States. With the boom of the 50's and 60's, the bosses were faced with severe labor shortages in the imperialist heartlands. In Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States, this resulted in restrictions on immigration by workers from the semi-colonies being (temporarily) relaxed. But it also resulted in women being *actively encouraged to enter the workforce*, a phenomenon that had not previously taken place outside of conditions of imperialist war. Thus, the expansion of capitalism in the post-war years led to the influx of women into service sector jobs and into unskilled and semi-skilled blue collar jobs. Petty-bourgeois women also began to gain access to male-dominated "professional" positions in capitalist corporations, as well as in the media, law, medicine, and so on.

Of course, the ruling class continued to emphasize that men were the real "breadwinners," that women would only need to work for "pin money," and that the top priority for any woman would continue to be her household and family. What did change, however, were laws facilitating the influx of women into the labor market. This included, for instance, liberalization of the divorce laws, which gave women the degree of independence they needed to function in the job market. Legal restrictions on birth control, and later, access to abortion, and with them social and practical restrictions on women's sexuality, were lifted at least partly because women were in demand as workers rather than child-bearers. Because of the change in the prevailing material conditions due to the post-war boom, sectors of the bourgeoisie were willing to give some concessions to women's social equality. However, there was still a lot of resistance within the ruling class to these developments; thus, women's gains were achieved only through the direct social impact of the mass struggles of the 60's and 70's.

Spurred by the contemporaneous mass movements for civil rights and against the Vietnam war, women in the United States began to organize their struggles for reproductive rights and equality under the banner of the "women's liberation movement." Of course, many of the demands of this movement were ones which revolutionaries could and should have critically supported. However, unlike the civil rights movement, which was predominantly working class, the women's liberation movement was cross-class, and was dominated by a leadership which was overwhelmingly bourgeois or petty-bourgeois in social character, and almost entirely bourgeois in its ideology. The politics of this phase of the women's movement are exemplified by the fact that while it waged a major publicity campaign regarding the fact that working women at that time earned an average of 59¢ for every dollar earned by men, it *never questioned or even mentioned* the even greater discrepancy between the average income of proletarian workers—male or female—and that of members of the ruling class.

In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded as a politically bourgeois women's organization, based on the aim of furthering the interests of

"professional" women *within the framework of capitalism*. While NOW initially claimed to be the party of the women's movement in the United States, and also claimed some "autonomy" from the Democratic Party, it quickly began to reveal its true colors. Largely because of the role of NOW, the cross-class women's movement of the 60's and 70's became tied directly to the Democratic Party, and all of its nationalist, chauvinist, anti-union—and sexist—politics. Under the leadership of NOW, the mainstream women's movement never challenged the legitimacy of capitalism, and further, it witch-hunted and red-baited those who dared to voice anti-capitalist politics. In its early days, NOW even went so far as to denounce and expel lesbians from the organization, on the grounds that their involvement could serve to discredit the women's movement!

The explicitly bourgeois program of NOW guaranteed that the liberal feminist movements of the 60's and 70's never took the demands of working class women seriously, e.g., for quality, round the clock child care. But, then, because of their political trajectory—equality of professional women with men *under capitalism*—the mainstream feminist movements typified by NOW<sup>14</sup> were never taken seriously by working class women either. And, not surprisingly, while working class women cer-

tainly gained from the liberalization of the 60's and 70's, in reality only the more privileged layers of working class and petit bourgeois women were in a position to *make the most* of these gains. The fact that working class women do not have *practical* access to abortion, even though it has been legalized,<sup>15</sup> is just one example of the failure of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women's movement to make a real difference to the lives of working class women. As outlined at the beginning of this document, the real economic situation of working class women in the 90's remains dismal despite the superficial legal and social gains of the "second wave" feminist movement.

In the 1960's and 70's, much of the United States left, including the centrist Socialist Workers Party, adopted as their own such slogans of the cross-class feminist movement as "Sisterhood is Powerful" and "Women Unite." The SWP built, tailed and politically adapted to the women's liberation movement and its cross-class politics. The SWP worked actively within NOW on a long-term basis, despite the fact that the SWP clearly understood that NOW was a *bourgeois* organization which did not attract working class women to any significant extent. In the 1970's, the SWP built cross-class coalitions like WONAAC (Women's National Abortion Action Coalition), which was formed by the SWP and the left wing of NOW before the Roe v. Wade abortion rights decision. WONAAC limited its demands to those of the petty-bourgeois milieu to which it was trying to appeal. In 1972, for example, a WONAAC conference expressly rejected the slogan "Free Abortion on Demand," a decision later explained by WONAAC's newsletter on the ground that it would be incorrect to demand that something be free while it was still illegal!

In building WONAAC, the SWP explicitly declared that it was "put[ting] forward the position of the feminist movement" and "demonstrat[ing] the power of women." Nowhere was there to be found a connection between the struggle for reproductive rights and the role of the organized labor movement. In short, the class question was deliberately blurred by the SWP, and the "sisterhood is powerful" position highlighted. In 1971, the SWP's Political Committee went so far as to pass a resolution stating that "There is an objective basis for a unified struggle of women of different nationalities and classes because all women are oppressed as women by capitalism." ("Toward a Mass Feminist Movement," SWP Political Committee Draft Resolution, April 1971 (emphasis added))

The political errors of the SWP were rooted directly in an economic perspective towards the mass movements that erupted at that time—that is, an opportunistic belief that the "historical process" in and of itself would carry the working class to power, with the role of the revolutionary party being simply to "guide" the masses in the right direction. One justification that the SWP put for-

<sup>14</sup> Although it was a narrowly-focused, cross-class formation, the women's movement of the 60's and 70's was not completely homogeneous. Indeed it was relatively loosely organized, and politically fairly heterogeneous. (See *American Women since 1945*, Gatlin (1987), p. 115.) The "women's movement," broadly defined, incorporated not only the solidly bourgeois politics of NOW, but also various reformist currents of the petty-bourgeoisie, including more left-wing "progressive" liberalism, radical feminism, lesbian separatism, and ultra-left radicalism. But underlying these different currents was a common political thread: Unity of all women against sexist male domination, and in particular, dictatorial male power, or patriarchy. In short, even the most "left" of these currents viewed women's oppression as (at least primarily) gender-based rather than class-based. From their perspective, the force oppressing women was "patriarchy," not (or more than) the bourgeoisie, and the solution was to put power in the hands of women, not the working class. Moreover, despite the nods made by some small sections of the feminist movement in the direction of socialism, because the movement as a whole was based on the "sisterhood" of all women, regardless of class, it was dominated both numerically and ideologically by women whose political orientation was purely bourgeois. The few elements of the movement which attempted to blend feminism with socialism, such as the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP), tended to capitulate to the feminist aspect of this blend, and at any rate were inevitably relegated to the fringes of the women's movement and never exercised any serious influence over its program. Thus, "second wave" feminism posed a similar danger to working class women as the bourgeois feminism of Kollontai's day. This is demonstrated by the fact that its gains either have not reached working class women (see section 9 of this document) or have eroded away under the pressure of the increasing capitalist economic crisis.

<sup>15</sup> See section 9 of this document, below.



ward for its disastrous adaptations to feminism and other alien class ideologies was the position that the militant sectors of the student and anti-war movements represented "new vanguards of a mass character." This position in fact represented a major centrist distortion of the Leninist theory of the vanguard party. Lenin, more than any other Bolshevik leader, *polemicized fiercely* against those who tailed the spontaneity of the working class and the mass movements in pre-revolutionary Russia, in his famous work *What Is to Be Done?* Those against whom he polemicized—the Economists—were the early 20th century equivalents of the SWP of the 1960's. Indeed, the SWP's capitulation was even worse, because while the Economists tailed the reformist politics of mass workers' organizations, the SWP went even further and tailed petty-bourgeois and bourgeois movements.

In many ways, the centrist left of today, especially the RWL, the FSP, Socialist Action and Socialist Organizer, are attempting to repeat the same mistakes that the SWP made in the 60's and 70's. Not coincidentally, most of these centrist currents *originated* in the SWP of the 60's. The RWL and the FSP in particular tend to fetishize oppression, especially women's oppression, and thereby elevate it *above* the class question.<sup>16</sup> The

FSP consciously refers to itself as "revolutionary feminist," which (for reasons that should be clear to the reader by now) is a contradiction in terms. The RWL goes so far as to characterize the oppression of women (as well as gays and other social groups) as "special" oppression, implying that the oppression of these groups exists independently of class society.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, this is an adaptation to petty-bourgeois pressures. For the RWL and the FSP, the *most important* task for revolutionaries today is to fight oppression in general, and to fight it with militant (but not necessarily proletarian) methods. According to the RWL, capitalism can be overthrown by building a party based primarily on the oppressed in society (regardless of class), while at the same time appealing to the workers to join it!

The RWL's approach to mini-cross-class movements such as ACT-UP and BACORR is not unlike

<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, other brands of centrists in the United States such as Labor Militant (and to some extent the Workers League) capitulate in the opposite direction, that is, to workerist pressure (economism). (See, for example, *Facing the Challenge of the 90's* (Labor Militant).) These organizations tend to *reduce* the oppression of women in society to exploitation itself; that is, they do not acknowledge that social oppression burdens work-

ing class women in a way that is separate from, and in addition to, their class status. As a result, these groups ignore the fact that women workers are divided from male workers specifically because of *capitalism's systematic denial of women's equality*. They ignore the fact that male and female workers will be politically divided from each other unless other sectors of the working class (especially male workers) actively support the most pressing demands of proletarian women, such as free abortion on demand. Thus, the only real program that these economist organizations have to offer is a purely abstract call for men and women workers to . . . unite, period.

<sup>17</sup> Discussed in *The Specially Oppressed and the Proletarian Vanguard* (ITC, 1987).



"It's a disgrace! Ten years ago, I was the only woman on the staff, and today I'm still the only woman on the staff."

**The problem with bourgeois feminism: a hell run by women is still hell!**

the SWP's approach to NOW.<sup>18</sup> Like WONAAC, these movements have done little, if anything, to advance the struggle of the working class, and in fact in the long run *represent an obstacle to that struggle*. But, as was pointed out at the beginning of this document, groups like the RWL see the "specially oppressed" as a vanguard—in much the same way as the SWP originally did—and the working class as, at best, an important *ally* of this "vanguard." In line with this opportunistic approach, the RWL have worked within NOW and have gone so far as to call on its leadership to form a *labor party*. While NOW has co-opted wider sectors of women since the 1960's, and has more of a working-class membership today, the RWL's approach to this organization, is still, in effect, no different than calling on the leaders of the Democratic Party to break with the ruling class and build a labor party! By calling on the leadership of a bourgeois organization to carry out one of the most urgent tasks of the working class, the RWL reveals both a deep cynicism towards the labor movement and a readiness to sow reformist illusions in the political representatives of the ruling class. This is an example of the worst kind of what Trotsky referred to as the "centrist amalgam." In contrast to the RWL, revolutionaries must call on working class women in the rank and file of NOW to *break with this bourgeois organization* and join the struggle for a workers' party—not ask the leadership of NOW to build one!

Clearly, the 60's represented a very specific historical situation in the United States, which will not simply be repeated in the 90's. The war in Vietnam, the capitalist boom of the 50's and early 60's, the struggle for civil rights by the black working class—all of these factors were essential in creating the mass, single issue, multi-class movements which arose in the United States at that time. Since the mid-70's, however, the few single-issue formations that have arisen, such as the Central American solidarity movement and the anti-Gulf War movement, have been relatively short-lived and ineffectual. For the RTL, this is directly attributable to the absence of the working class and its leadership in the movements of the 80's and 90's. Unlike in the 60's, when a unique combination of factors helped to make possible the development of mass cross-class formations, *the 90's will not produce powerful movements of the masses without the active involvement of the working class*. In other words, the conditions of

the 60's, and the liberal feminist and other mass movements that developed at that time, cannot and will not be mechanically repeated today. Unlike the nostalgic leftists of the RWL, the FSP, and Socialist Action, we in the RTL do not have a political yearning to return to the 60's. We are not opposed to making temporary tactical alliances with petty-bourgeois feminists for specific concrete actions such as abortion clinic defense. But we do not advocate trying to rebuild any kind of radical petty-bourgeois or cross-class movement as a long-term political strategy for women's liberation. Today, what is urgently needed is not another WONAAC, but mass movements organized *around the working class* and its organs of struggle.

### 9. The Struggle for Reproductive Rights in the United States: A Working Class Issue

The struggle for women's reproductive rights is a perfect example of the weakness of the cross-class feminist approach to the struggle against women's oppression, and of the need to root women's struggle in a working class base with a working class program. Abortion was illegal in most states of the United States for almost a century prior to the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. In that decision, the Supreme Court held that laws prohibiting abortions in the first two trimesters of pregnancy violated a woman's "constitutional right to privacy." It was primarily as a result of the need for women in the workforce, as well as the militancy of the women's movement of the 70's, that the ruling class was prepared to make this concession. It did so partly in order to defuse and demobilize the mass movements, and partly in order to reinforce the illusions of the populace—especially the petty-bourgeoisie—in the state and the legal system.

However, the ruling class—as represented by its servants on the Supreme Court—was, of course, very careful to limit the scope of decision so as to make sure that only the more advantaged layers of society—the ruling class itself, plus the relatively well-to-do petty-bourgeoisie and the most privileged sectors of the workers—would be able to benefit directly from *Roe v. Wade*. The decision was deliberately based, not on a woman's fundamental right to full control of her reproductive capacity—something the capitalist class was unwilling to concede—but on an ambiguous bourgeois "right to privacy." In other words, the right announced by *Roe v. Wade* was defined in a way that made it highly vulnerable to legislative and judicial erosion, and even to outright reversal by the Supreme Court the moment the ruling class deemed it necessary.

The legalization of abortion that came about with *Roe v. Wade* was a very partial victory for working class women in the United States. Abortions did become available and safe. But they remained expensive procedures, carried out by private (mostly male) doctors, and were not easily accessible to working class women. Under *Roe v. Wade*, abortion was not free, was not available on demand, and was a "private decision between a woman and her physi-

<sup>18</sup> ACT-UP is Action Coalition To Unleash Power, an activist organization which works on behalf of people with AIDS and HIV. BACORR is Bay Area Coalition for Our Reproductive Rights, a group of activists in the San Francisco Bay Area which uses militant tactics to defend abortion clinics from right-wing blockades. (See "Why We Need Labor to Defend Abortion Clinics," *International Trotskyist* No. 5 (Spring 1992) and "Labor Must Defend the Clinics," *International Trotskyist* No. 8 (Fall 1993).)

cian"—thus requiring the woman to have access to a doctor, something which many poor and working class women cannot afford. Thus, even when *Roe v. Wade* was first handed down, it did not give women real, practical access to abortion, even during the first trimester of pregnancy. The majority of poor and working class women in the United States were still denied access to affordable, safe abortions.

For the first few years after *Roe v. Wade*, women poor enough to be on welfare—a category which excluded the vast majority of working class women—could, at least in theory, have their abortions covered by federal Medicaid funding, although very few public hospitals and clinics actually provided them. But even this was only possible for a short while, because in 1976 the United States Congress passed the Hyde Amendment, which banned Medicaid funding for abortion unless a woman's life was in danger. As a result, the funds which had paid for one-third of all abortions carried out in the United States in the previous year immediately became unavailable, and the only options left to poor women, especially women of color, were sterilization or the constant risk of pregnancy.

The Supreme Court, which in 1973 had been hailed as a protector of women's rights, showed its true colors in 1980 when it upheld the constitutionality of the Hyde Amendment in *Harris v. McRae*. The reasoning used by the Court to justify upholding the Hyde Amendment is very revealing. *Roe v. Wade*, the Court said, simply held that the state could not create obstacles to a woman's right to an early abortion; it did not obligate the state to remove obstacles to abortion which were "not of its own creation"—as if the capitalist system were not responsible for creating a pregnant woman's poverty!

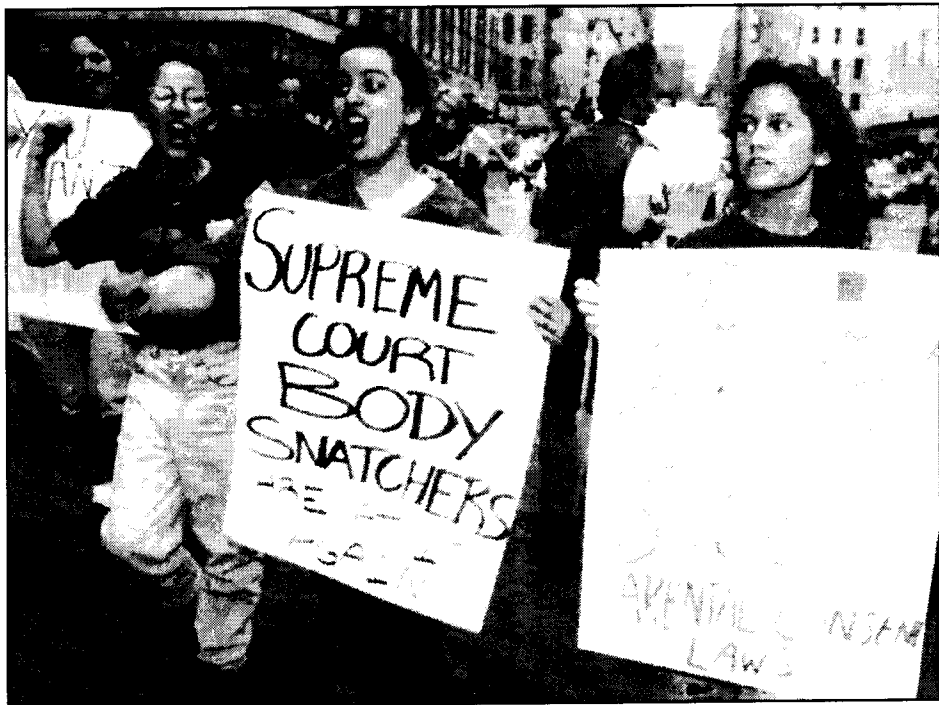
In 1991, in *Rust v. Sullivan*, the Supreme Court allowed the bourgeoisie to hamper working class and poor women's abortion rights even more. It upheld regulations implementing the Hyde Amendment—the so-called "gag rule"—which prohibited staff in publicly-funded family planning clinics from even mentioning to poor pregnant women that abortion was a legally available option for them. The hypocrisy of *Roe v. Wade* thus stood fully revealed: abortion is *only* "a private decision between a woman and her physician" if the woman has enough money to pay the physician herself!

In addition to upholding the federal Hyde Amendment, the Supreme Court validated several attacks by state legislators on abortion rights, including the laws upheld in the notorious *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* rulings in 1989 and 1992 respectively. Both *Webster* and *Casey* in effect amounted to partial reversals of *Roe v. Wade*—although the Supreme Court has so far refused to overturn *Roe* outright, thus preserving the modern reproductive privileges of ruling class women.

In *Webster*, the court upheld a Missouri anti-abortion law which prevented all state-funded facilities from performing abortions and required a doctor performing an abortion after 20 weeks of pregnancy to determine the "viability" of the fetus. While *Roe* had held that laws prohibiting abortion in the first two trimesters were unconstitutional, *Webster* ruled that after 20 weeks an abortion *could* be considered illegal if the fetus were determined to be viable. *Casey* followed where *Webster* had left off, upholding the constitutionality of provisions in the infamous Pennsylvania Abortion Control Act which required doctors to provide (state-approved) counseling

biased in favor of childbirth (!), and also mandated a 24-hour wait between the required counseling and the abortion. Like the law in *Webster* prohibiting abortion in state-funded facilities, the 24-hour waiting period involved in *Casey* was directly aimed at placing obstacles to abortion in the path of poor and working class women, because it required extra travel, lodging and child care costs, as well as additional time off from work—all of which would pose little problem for the wealthy, but which very few working class women could afford.

Both the Missouri law on which *Webster* was based, and the law involved in the *Casey* ruling, contained the im-



Women protest against the reactionary decisions of the Supreme Court



RTL photo **Militant women defend an abortion clinic**

plication that human life *begins at conception*. The Supreme Court in *Casey* went so far as to assert that it was the prerogative of the state to protect fetal life from the moment of conception—so long as it did not “unduly burden access to an abortion”! (“Undue burden” being, of course, defined by what would be an undue burden for a ruling class woman, with no consideration given to the law’s practical effect on the working class and the poor.) What is written between the lines here is that for the Supreme Court, the human embryo has “rights” which, like those of the mother—a *living person in society with a real life*—should be defended by the state. It is but one step from this position to the conclusion that abortion be outlawed altogether, in order to protect the “rights” of the unborn. For Marxists, however, rights are *socially defined*. They arise from an individual’s involvement in society, and thus cannot and do not exist in a vacuum. For this reason, human tissues, embryos and fetuses do not possess social “rights”! Only when a child is born and enters the sphere of human society can Marxists assert that it has rights in the real meaning of the word. It is for this reason that the RTL insists that every woman has the unconditional right to choose whether or not to have a child, including the right to an abortion if she has an unwanted pregnancy. For us, it is absolutely essential that working class women control their own fertility, in order to be fully able to participate in social production, and in social life in general. Our position is clear: Free abortion and contraception on demand for every woman! Free, high-quality, round-the-clock child care in every community and

workplace, funded by the capitalists and the state! For workers’ defense guards to defend abortion clinics!

The Hyde Amendment, *Rust*, *Casey*, and *Webster* are all examples of how *Roe v. Wade* has been legally eroded since 1973. The most important thing to note, however, is that these cutbacks on the right to abortion *do not affect all women equally*. They specifically represent attacks against working class, poor and young women—attacks which go hand in hand with cuts in welfare and government-funded projects which primarily benefit working class women, such as women’s crisis centers, shelters, neighborhood clinics, etc. As a result of all these attacks, only a minority of women in the United States have access to abortion today, and it is practically impossible for a woman on welfare to obtain one.<sup>19</sup> The justices of the Supreme Court were very much aware of this situation when they made their anti-abortion rulings between 1980 and 1992. Thus, the bourgeois courts and legislatures were able to find a way to provide access to reproductive rights for bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women while

denying them to working class women. As a result, the bourgeois leaders of the women’s movement have turned a large part of their attention and energy to other things, leaving their working class “sisters” in the lurch. This history sharply demonstrates the fatal weakness of basing the struggle for reproductive rights—or against any aspect of women’s oppression—on a cross-class, feminist women’s movement.

Meanwhile, as the women’s movement devoted its attention to other issues (and to some extent simply faded away), the Supreme Court decisions were the green light that the anti-abortion movement was waiting for. Since the beginning of the 1980’s, hundreds of abortion clinics have been bombed, burned and vandalized by the right-wing terrorists of organizations like Operation Rescue (OR). Those clinics that have not been physically attacked have been picketed by this reactionary, misogynist organization, in order to prevent women from entering them. Abortion clinic workers in particular have been

<sup>19</sup> Despite Bill Clinton’s fanfare over the Democrats’ national “health care reform” scam, the working class in the United States will not have access to free, high-quality healthcare, either in the 90’s or beyond. In fact, it will be workers who have to pick up the tab for this plan. (See “Clinton’s Health Care Scam,” *International Trotskyist* No. 9 (Winter 1993-94).) Moreover, Clinton’s health plan is deliberately silent on the question whether abortions will be covered, and Hillary Clinton’s off-the-record assurances that it will be are just about as reliable as her husband’s campaign promise to overturn the ban against gays in the military!

targeted with beatings, maimings, bomb threats and other forms of harassment. While OR formally denies responsibility for it, the murder of Dr. Peter Gunn in Florida was a clear step in the direction of terror and murder aimed at those who defend the right of women to abortion. What is also alarming is that, between the attacks of the Supreme Court and those of the right wing, it is now impossible for a woman to get a safe, legal abortion in over 80% of the counties of the United States (unless, of course, she can afford the money and time to travel). Partly as a result of this, women have been forced to turn to dangerous illegal back-alley abortions and "self-help" methods such as menstrual extraction in order to exercise their right to choose.

As OR and its right-wing allies grow bolder and use more aggressive tactics (including sheer brute force and even murder), it becomes clearer that labor defense guards centered around the unions are essential to stop their attacks. Organizations of pro-choice radicals and activists, such as BACORR, have played an active role in clinic defense since the 1980's. But *on their own*, these organizations no longer have the resources and the numbers necessary to effectively defend the clinics on a national (or even a local) level. What happened in Wichita, Kansas in the summer of 1991 is only one example. For this reason, revolutionaries must fight within the pro-choice movement for an orientation towards the working class and its organizations. They must fight for the adoption of clinic defense resolutions within the unions as a means of mobilizing contingents of women and men union members to defend abortion clinics physically against the right wing and other foot soldiers of the ruling class. One such resolution was proposed by the RTL as part of a labor clinic defense committee in the Bay Area and was adopted by SEIU Local 790. This resolution has already been utilized by the RTL to mobilize SEIU union members in defending family planning clinics attacked by Operation Rescue.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, passing clinic defense resolutions is only the *first step*. The unions must be impelled to *contribute their resources*, so that activists can carry out the tasks of mobilizing the rank and file to defend the clinics, and to do so in conjunction with other unions. The union bureaucrats must be exposed if they refuse to put the power and the resources of the union behind clinic defense resolutions.

For the RTL, the working class is central for clinic defense for two reasons. First, the attacks on abortion rights are first and foremost attacks on working class women; they are the ones who mainly use the clinics, because they cannot afford private doctors. Second, only organized labor has the resources and the power needed to mobilize the working class to smash OR and similar organizations completely. Unfortunately, this fundamen-

tal truth is not understood by the feminist and radical coalitions which are involved in defending clinics today. Even worse, NOW, NARAL, the ACLU and the rest of the "moderates" (though not the more radical activist groups such as BACORR) have traditionally relied on the police, the law and the courts to keep the clinics open and defend the right to choose. But experience clearly shows that the forces of the capitalist state will not stop OR and its allies.

For the struggle to defeat OR to be successful, the organized working class, and working class women in particular, must play a leading role in the fight for abortion rights. Women's participation in this important struggle can increase the level of unity and class consciousness in the labor movement, and also underscore the basic principle that working women as well as men should be actively engaged in the class struggle. Working class women *and* men must mobilize together to form defense guards, to patrol the clinics and protect health workers and their clients. This is the best way to keep the clinics open in the face of increasingly violent right-wing attacks. If the unions are involved in leading these mobilizations, they can put real power behind clinic defense. This will also help them attract unorganized workers into their ranks, and strengthen the working class in general against increasingly vicious capitalist attacks.

## 10. The Role of a Working Class Women's Movement

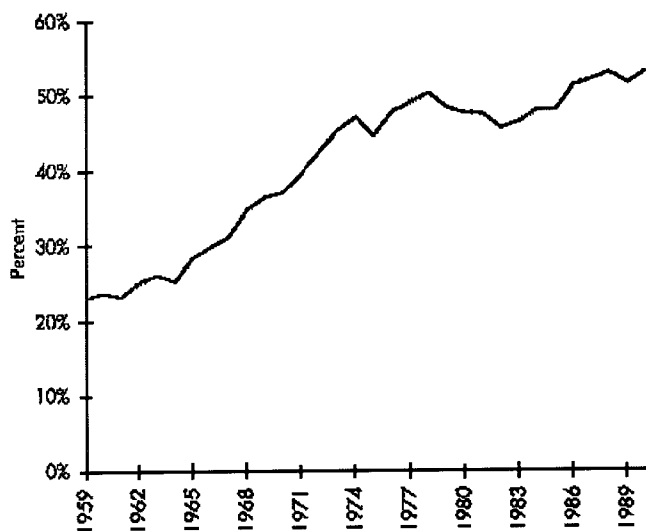
The role of working class women in the class struggle is not, of course, limited to mobilizing in support of their reproductive freedom. On the contrary, as we pointed out in section 5 of this document, working class women have taken on an increasingly important role in leading strikes and organizing unions since the mid-1980's. This is hardly surprising, since women workers now make up almost



*"I'm sorry you could only find a part-time job...  
But part-time mortgage payments just aren't possible."*

<sup>20</sup> See "Labor Must Defend the Clinics," *International Trotskyist* No. 6 (Fall/Winter 1992) and "Labor Must Defend the Clinics," *International Trotskyist* No. 8 (Fall 1993).

**Families with Female Householder as Percent of All Poor Families, 1959-1990**

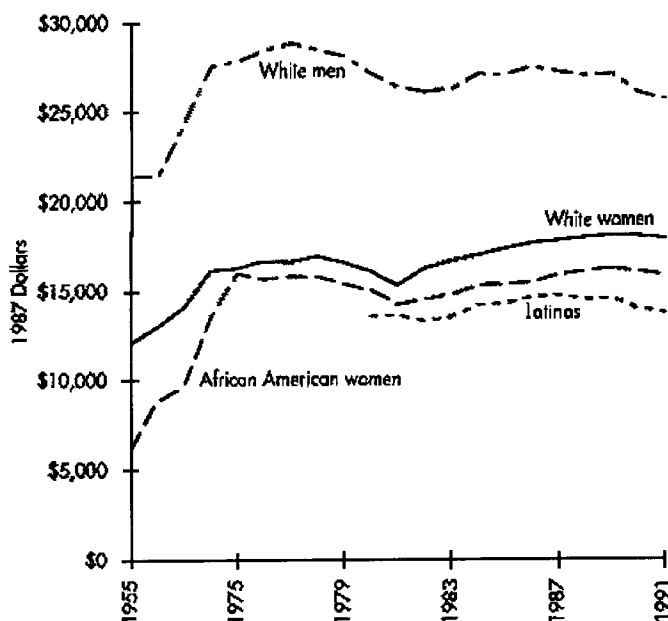


These two charts clearly illustrate that women's oppression is rooted in the exploitative capitalist system. They also illustrate that working class women have nothing to lose but their shackles, and therefore it is likely that working class women will play a decisive role in the struggle for the socialist revolution and the liberation of the working class.

50% of the North American working class. Two out of three new entrants into the labor force are women, and one out of three are women of color. This is a dramatic increase in the female composition of the workforce, especially in comparison to the period before World War II.<sup>21</sup> Even at a time when there were fewer women in the workforce, Trotsky counseled that because "[t]he decay of capitalism . . . deals its heaviest blows to the woman as a wage earner and as a housewife[, t]he sections of the Fourth International should seek bases of support among the most exploited layers of the working class, consequently among the women workers." (L. Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (Pathfinder Press, 1973), p. 151.)

Given the increasingly active role of women in the labor movement, as well as the disproportionately heavy impact of the capitalist economic crisis on women, it is quite possible that sectors of women workers may decide to organize themselves into a proletarian women's movement in the United States in order to combat their oppression directly and defend themselves against the attacks of the state and the ruling class on abortion rights, health care, employment, welfare, etc. Clearly, the building of a

**Median Annual Income of Women and White Men, Full-Time Year-Round Workers, 1955-1991 (in 1987 dollars)**



working class women's movement would be an important gain and a step forward for the working class—especially in comparison to the cross-class feminist movements that were formed in the 1960's and 70's. A working class women's movement, by drawing in the unorganized, the unemployed, and women in the home, could play an important role in unifying different sectors of working class women in the struggle against the capitalist system, as a whole.

What is crucial here, however, is the *programmatic basis* on which such a movement is built. The working class women's movement cannot be developed as an abstraction, and it cannot be a separatist movement. Instead, it must be developed with key programmatic demands in the class struggle, and it must be linked with and become part of a progressive or revolutionary movement which represents *every* sector of the working class. Revolutionaries must fight to win a working class women's movement to our program of transitional demands, and to win the leadership of this movement from the centrists, feminists and reformists. Within a proletarian, class struggle-based women's movement, the RTL would fight to win the movement to revolutionary politics based on demands such as: Free abortion and contraception on demand! Nationalization of the health care industry under the control of health workers! Work or full pay for all, including the unemployed, at union wages, based on a sliding scale of hours! Equal pay and comparable worth for women! No layoffs, no plant closures! Billions of government dollars to restore and build social support

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau (1992).





**Our program calling for nationalization of the health care industry under the control of health workers should be combined with demands such as "health care for all" taken up by these working class women**

systems for working parents and their children!

The development of a working class women's movement with a program such as the foregoing would be an important progressive step for women workers and all workers, and could even be of critical importance. The RTL recognizes, however, that the development of such a movement in the United States is not an inevitability, and that a workers' revolution can take place in the United States *without one*. Indeed, it is *highly unlikely* that a proletarian women's movement will arise in the United States in isolation, separated off from a movement for a labor party or a militant rank and file movement in the trade unions or the working class generally. If such a movement arises, it will almost certainly arise *as part of a general militant working class movement* in the United States.

We would of course seek to unite the struggle for a working women's movement with any rank and file workers' movement against capitalism, on the basis, as we have pointed out, of a militant, class struggle program. However, within that context we support the formation by the workers' movement of integrated committees to deal with issues of special concern to women. We also recognize that it may sometimes be necessary for women workers to convene separately on an ad hoc basis to

combat any social oppression, such as sexist behavior by co-workers, which may linger on within the workers' movement as the result of centuries of capitalist rule. However, we oppose any permanent, separate feminist caucus within the workers' movement which detracts from the unity of the working class.

The British miners' wives support groups in the coal strike of the mid-1980's were a good illustration of how a non-separatist movement of working women, fighting around a militant class struggle program (including combating the prejudices of the male miners!) played a central role in a big European strike in the 1980's. The same kind of significant role was played by the Russian working women's movement, particularly in its support for the Bolshevik Party, in 1917. Just so, today in the United States, any proletarian women's movement *must be linked to the building of a workers' party* or other anti-capitalist organ of the working class, based on the unions and other organizations of oppressed workers. A working class women's movement which is not linked directly to the fighting organs of the working class in the United States will be little more than an empty political shell. In addition, this movement must include demands that will *draw working men* into the struggle, in order for it to remain non-exclusivist.

**The Revolutionary Trotskyist League, which publishes *International Trotskyist* and *Workers' Voice*, is fraternally affiliated with the International Liaison Committee of Communists (ILCC). The other organizations which participate in the ILCC include the Revolutionär Kommunistische Liga (RKL) in Austria, Voce Operaia (VO) in Italy, the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP) in Sri Lanka, and MAULWURF/Revolutionäre SozialistInnen in Germany.**

**The ILCC publishes an English-language paper entitled *InTroCor*, which is available in the US through the RTL by writing to the RTL's address.**

In short, for the RTL, it is essential that the struggles of women workers be connected to the struggle of the working class *as a whole*, via the method of the transitional program. Today, this can be carried out by organizing around key demands such as:

- No public service cuts, no layoffs, no plant closures!
- Open the government budget books to full inspection by the workers!
- Billions of government dollars to restore and build social support systems for working parents and their children!
- Open the unions to the most oppressed!
- Sufficiently long maternity and paternity leave for all

workers, with no loss in pay!

- Free quality round-the-clock child care in every community and workplace, funded by the bosses and the state!
  - Nationalization of the health care industry under the control of health workers!
  - Free abortion and contraception on demand, including the RU-486 pill!
  - For workers' defense guards to defend abortion clinics!
  - Equal pay and comparable worth for women! Work or full pay for all, at union wages, based on a sliding scale of hours!
  - Build a labor party based on the unions and organizations of oppressed workers, to fight for the rights of women and all workers!
-