

Workers' Solidarity Federation

Women's Freedom

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We believe that women are oppressed as a sex. They are denied equal rights, such as the right to control their own fertility and the right to equal pay for equal work. They have been assigned the role of cooks and child minders, their place is said to be in the home.

Women's freedom and the class struggle

We believe that the root of women's oppression lies in the division of society into classes, and the economic and social relationships that this created. By giving women the worst work, with no job security, the bosses create a super-cheap workforce which they can hire or fire at will. Cheap women workers can be used as a threat against men workers, and as a way for bosses to increase their profits by cutting down the wage bill. Because women have no real job security they are often fired when they get pregnant, meaning the bosses do not have to pay extra benefits or maternity leave.

Women's unpaid work in the household supplies the bosses with the next generation of workers at no extra cost, as women are doing the cooking, cleaning and child rearing for free. They also take care of the sick and the elderly in the same way. The bosses say that women's low wages are justified because men are the "breadwinners" in the family. But most working-class women do the housework as well as join the workforce. In this way, they work a "double shift" at great personal cost. Women's low wages often keep them trapped in abusive and oppressive relationships. The bosses' media is a key cause of such situations, because it promotes hateful and exploitative images of women, which say that women exist to be used and abused. Some men believe these lies because of their frustrations from oppression at work or unemployment out on their families and other women. Of course, this does not make such behaviour acceptable, as such actions are intolerable. But these factors show that sexist behaviour by men is rooted in conditions under capitalism, not in men's hormones or biological nature, as the ruling class claims.

So we recognise that while ordinary men may play a role in women's oppression, they are not the primary cause of the problem. The problem can only be properly dealt with by both challenging men's sexist behaviour (which divides the masses and is unjust), and by challenging the sexist structures of the capitalist system. We do not deny that ordinary men may gain from women's oppression in the short-term in the sense that they may have a feeling of "superiority" to women, or have a slightly lower rate of unemployment or better-paid jobs. But in the long-term, women's oppression has disastrous results for men. It divides workers

struggles. It results in lower overall family incomes and lower job security for all. It creates personal unhappiness.

We recognise that all women suffer oppression. But wealthy women have access to maids, lawyers and so on which enables them to “buy” their way out of a lot of the misery that ordinary women face. In fact, these women are part of the problem as they defend capitalism and the State because it is their own class interests. We thus believe that for women to be really free we have to smash capitalism and build a society based on Anarcho-Syndicalism on a class-struggle basis. We disagree with those feminists who think that all you have to do is for women to become bosses and politicians to achieve equality. We want to destroy the existing power structures.

Separate organisations?

Women’s oppression is not purely a struggle for women as it is a working class issue but we do defend women’s right to organise separately in women-only organisations. This is because we recognise that it is women who actually suffer sexism, and because we support the democratic right of free association.

But this does not mean that we promote such organisations as the way forward. On the contrary, while we recognise that people may see such organisations as necessary in specific circumstances, we also know that this strategy has many weaknesses. Firstly, we think that separate organisations are almost always a bad idea in the workplace because successful trade union action relies on the unity of the workers. Small women-only workplace groups are usually too weak to win against the bosses on their own, and they can even act to undermine and destroy existing unions if they call on women to leave the existing unions. There are cases where separate organisations have been used to undermine workers unity and struggle. Secondly, separate organisation often lends itself to the formation of multi-class alliances as it prioritises non-class identities (like womanhood) over class identity. In other words, it runs the risk of building alliances between working class and ruling class women. Thirdly, women need allies in the fight against women’s oppression in order to strengthen their demands. They need to have maximum support from other working and poor people if they are to win real concessions from the bosses and rulers. They also need to win men over to anti-sexist views. Women’s concerns should not be isolated in women-only groups, or left to the “women’s section” — these are issues of relevance to all working class people. Given that women’s oppression is not in the real interests of working class men, a basis for fighting unity around these demands already exists.

So while we defend the right of separate organisation, we do not endorse it. Having said that, however, we do recognise that it may be necessary to set up committees and structures in the unions and other working-class organisations to promote work amongst women and a focus on women's specific concerns. These sections or wings of the broader working-class movement can help make sure that women's concerns are not marginalised and also develop women's political confidence. However, we think that these sections must be based on the principles of class struggle (be specifically working-class), and build alliances with other movements of the workers, the poor and the working peasants. Without allies, such movements are too small and too weak to defeat the bosses and the rulers. We think it is up to these sections to decide whether they should allow men to join as well, or just recruit women.

Very often the priorities of the women's movement have reflected the fact that it largely dominated by middle-class women. We believe that it must become more relevant to working class women. Our priorities are those issues which immediately affect thousands of working class women e.g. work, childcare, housing, etc. We must fight for equal pay for equal work, for women's access to jobs that are traditionally denied to them, for job security for women, for free 24 childcare funded by the bosses and the State where women demand it, for paid maternity leave and guaranteed re-employment, and an end to all violence against women. We also think that it is only right that men do a fair share of the housework. We are for women having an equal right to all positions of "leadership" in mass organisations.

For these demands to be won as many working class women as possible must be drawn into the struggle against sexism, capitalism and the State. In campaigns to win these demands our emphasis is on building in workplaces and in the townships where women are directly affected. All progressive men must support (but not try to dominate) these struggles.

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