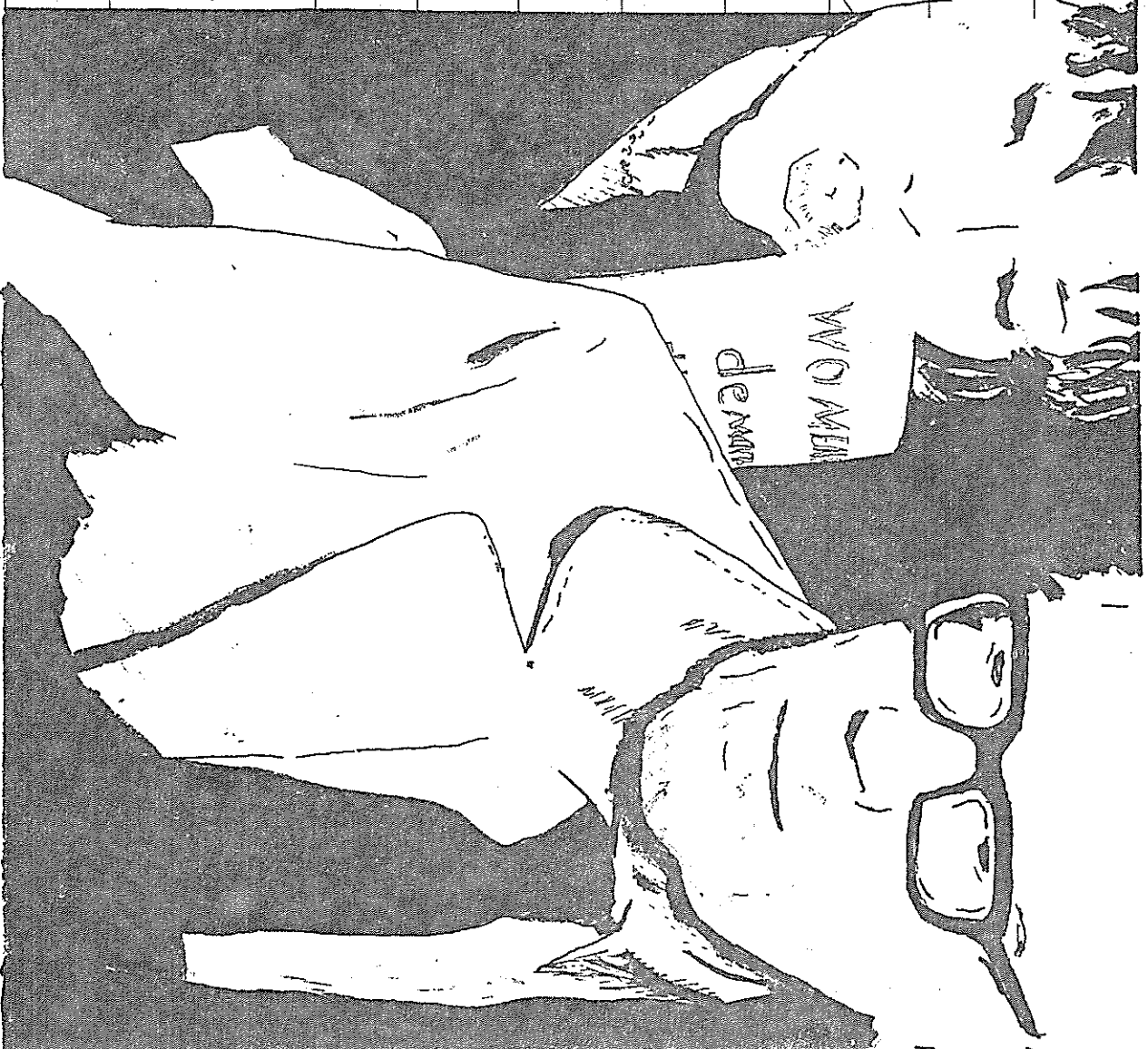
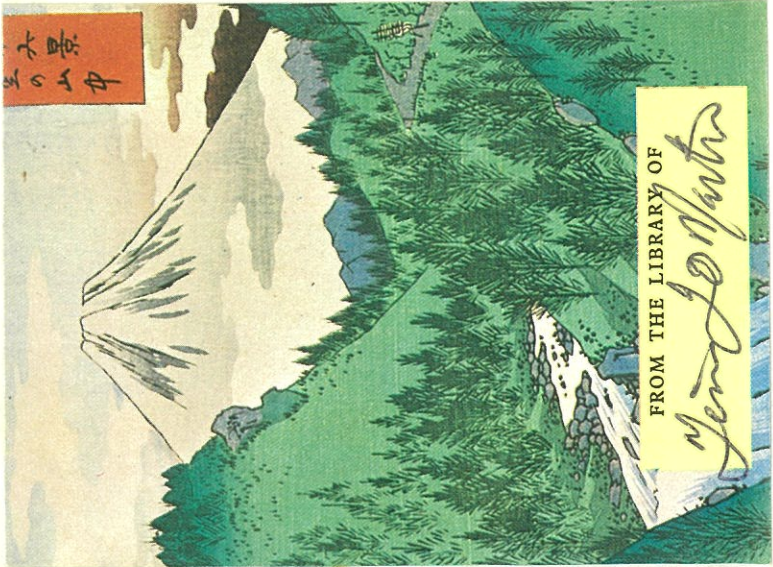


letters to... women for communism





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FROM THE LIBRARY OF

Jens L. Martin

Dear sisters ...

What follows is a set of letters to and from Women for Communism. The debate on rape, and the letters about what WfC is, illustrate our critique of feminism. We publish them as a contribution to the current discussions in the Women's Liberation Movement on its 'seven demands'. We hope sisters in the WLM will respond to the arguments we put forward here.

For those who wish to find out more about Women for Communism, with a view to joining us should write to:

Women for Communism
Box 33
164-166 Corn Exchange Building
Hanging Ditch
Manchester M4 3BD

The following letter, launching WfC appeared in the next step no 19 December 1981.

NOT SINCE the early 1920s has a revolutionary party taken up women's oppression as a vital working class issue. The Communist International's activity against women's oppression had two guiding principles. First, that communism was a precondition for the liberation of women, because it was capitalism that held women in subjection. And second, that the solutions offered by the feminists and the reformists would not only fail to bring communism, but would also betray women. Clara Zetkin warned the third congress in 1921 of the dangers of feminism and social democracy:

'Every sort of alliance of working women with bourgeois feminism, (as well as any support by the women workers for the treacherous tactics of the social compromisers and opportunists), leads to the undermining of the forces of the proletariat, delaying thereby the triumph of the social revolution and the advent of communism, and thus also postponing the great hour of women's ultimate liberation.'

It is in this spirit of the communist tradition that a group has been set up in Manchester called 'Women for Communism'. All other parties and organisations which deal with the issue, for example the SWP's Women's Voice and Socialist Organiser's Women's Fightback, derive from a separate tradition - the tradition of feminism. These organisations proudly state that they have much to learn from the Women's Liberation Movement, that 'sexism' and 'patriarchy' are indeed problems for the working class. At the same time they contemptuously dismiss the scientific understanding of women's oppression under capitalism developed by 'old men' like Marx, Engels and Lenin. By adapting to the feminist, the left has undermined its ability to take on the other class-collaborators - the reformists and the trade union leaders.

'Women for Communism' has three main objectives. We aim to develop and expound the Marxist analysis of women's oppression, to fight for the politics which flow from this understanding in the labour movement, and through challenging feminism, reformism and the radical left, forge an independent movement that can take women to communism. Join us!

Kate Marshall
Women for Communism

June 1982

FROM THE EDITORIAL OF 'MANCHESTER WOMEN'S LIBERATION NEWSLETTER', No 36,
April 1982.

In recent years we have had a policy of not printing material which is racist, or written by a man, or contains a personal attack on a named woman, or which contravenes the seven demands of the Women's Liberation Movement..... Recently we have made the decision not to print three items..... Two of these were letters - one arguing against abortion and the other containing anti-lesbian statements. We are writing back to both of these women to explain why we have not printed their contributions. The third item we are not printing is the contact address for Women for Communism, a mixed group which is part of the Revolutionary Communist Tendency, a party opposed to an autonomous women's movement..... Do we really want to buy a copy of a Women's Liberation Newsletter and find that it's anti-lesbian, anti-abortion and anti-feminist?

We accept that there are grey areas between being downright opposed to some of the WLM's aims and wishing to collectively change and develop them as our ideas and our shared experiences grow. Where does criticism and suggestion stop and contravening start? There is a fine line to tread here but we feel that we do have to have limits, and that it is possible and it is okay to decide not to spend energy on propagating views that are clearly against Women's Liberation, while still leaving room for discussing issues openly.....

In sisterhood,
MULN Collective.

OUR REPLY WHICH APPEARED IN 'MANCHESTER WOMEN'S LIBERATION NEWSLETTER',
No 37, May 1982.

Dear sisters,

On behalf of Women for Communism, I would like to object very strongly to your proscription of our group by deciding not to reproduce our contact address in Manchester Women's Liberation Newsletter. Furthermore this proscription is sold to your readership in a particularly dishonest way. You offered us no explanation (while you courteously replied to the two women who wrote to you opposing abortion and lesbians!), nor any right to reply to the criticisms made of us by Marya Durham in WIRES (reprinted in MULN No 36). We welcome criticisms of our ideas but if we are misrepresented without any comeback then your claim to be democratic is hollow.

In what way does Women for Communism contravene the seven demands of the WLM? Not only do we fully agree with each and every one of them, we fight for them in the working class. We have fought for the second demand through supporting the pickets of the women on strike at Rulecan, in Runcorn and by collecting money for their strike fund in Manchester. We have fought for the third through supporting every initiative of the National Abortion Campaign in Manchester and by raising motions in support of abortion on demand in several trade union branches locally. We supported the recent Reclaim the Night demonstration, in line with the seventh demand, and held a meeting on how to fight rape at the Polytechnic where a number of students have been raped or sexually harassed. We were on the last demonstration in Manchester in support of lesbians and gay men and have argued consistently in colleges and union branches for adequate nursery facilities. This first accusation is manifestly false.

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Secondly, you state that the Revolutionary Communist Party is 'a party opposed to an autonomous women's liberation movement'. In fact the RCP, which set up Women for Communism, is not opposed to women's groups, women's campaigns, women-only events or a women's liberation movement. For us, as communist women, the struggle of women against their oppression cannot be separate or autonomous from the class struggle. We believe that the specific oppression of women has its roots in the capitalist system which we are forced to live under. As a result the emancipation of women depends on the overthrow of capitalism. This is not to say that we are in favour of waiting for a revolution. The fight for our liberation starts today, around specific demands - those of the WLM. In this fight we try to overcome the divisions in the working class between men and women: we seek to convince male workers that issues like equal pay, nursery provision and abortion are in their interests too.

This is our main difference with feminism - we don't see men as a group as the enemy, but blame our oppression on the capitalist class. We seek to make alliances with working class men, despite the strong anti-woman (and anti-black, anti-gay) prejudices which prevail, because they too have an interest in overthrowing this system. Their refusal to offer support and solidarity to women in struggle holds back their own fight against our shared enemy.

Some feminists become communists, not because they are 'opposed to some of the WLM's aims' but because they believe that communist politics can achieve these aims. Don't doubt our motives; we are steadfast and completely opposed to every aspect of the oppression of women. We became communists through thinking through our own experiences and beliefs, not because, as Marya suggests, we are 'duped by men'. How insulting! Our views our minority views and we don't expect agreement all the time. But we expect the right to put them forward. We would appreciate the right to reply in more detail to Marya's letter and our contact address appearing in MWLN.

Carol Taggart,
Women for Communism.

LETTER TO US FROM 'MANCHESTER WOMEN'S LIBERATION NEWSLETTER', 19 April 1982.

Dear Carol,

We are very sorry that we did not write to you about our decision to remove your contact number and address from the Newsletter. You are quite right, we should have written to you with our reasons and we do apologise. We are printing your letter to us in full in the next newsletter together with an apology.

Yours,
Ros, pp MWLN.

FROM 'WIRES' No 125, 'MULM' No 36, 'THE NEXT STEP' No 23.

Dear Sisters,

I was interested to see the letter in WIRES no. 124 advertising the so-called 'Women for Communism'. Readers may care to know that this is not in fact a women's group at all but a front for a violently anti-feminist sect calling themselves the Revolutionary Communist Party.

They produce a monthly propaganda sheet entitled 'the next step' the latest issue of which introduces 'Women for Communism' in a rather different way from their letter in WIRES:

"Women for Communism aims to combat the traditions of feminism and Labourism which currently paralyse both the women's movement and the labour movement".

There follows a series of articles on women from which I have selected a few quotes for your digestion.

Rape

"Feminists isolate rape - and other extreme examples of the brutalisation of women, like wife-battering - from the day to day oppression of women in capitalist society...This leads to the identification of the problem as men - not capitalism".

"And it leads too to the narrow focus of today's women's movement which concentrates on issues like rape, while neglecting the broader struggles against cuts and closures, and for nursery and abortion facilities".

"Once aspects of women's oppression are separated from capitalism, women are isolated from the only section of society with an interest in defending women through fighting the system - the working class".

"Susan Brownmiller meets Margaret Thatcher: both want prison sentences for rapists. Feminists often go further than the Tories calling for longer sentences and police imposed curfews on men".

"Rape will continue to exist as long as capitalist social relations keep women in subjection".

"The working class has its own traditional methods of dealing with anti-social behaviour...We need to activate these traditions so that workers themselves - not the police - can take an active part in the defence of women's rights. This does not mean we should let the ruling class off the hook: we should fight to end night work, for adequate public transport and street lighting".

In the eyes of 'Women for Communism' then, rape is caused by capitalism and will be eliminated by a socialist revolution. In the meantime workers should do their bit and fight for better street lighting! I should stress that the article gives no alternative to prison sentences other than the unspecified 'traditional methods' of the working class.

Abortion

The article calls for abortion on demand, but criticises NAC on the grounds that

"Its main slogan was 'Free abortion on demand - a woman's right to choose'. In practice the first half of this slogan was always subordinated...The women's movement's preoccupation with individual choice above its concern for the collective defence of women's rights continuously undermined the effectiveness of NAC".

"NAC countered SPUC's hysterical propaganda by aping its methods..."

"Feminists pandered to every reactionary prejudice..."

"NAC argued against the exclusion of foreign women from abortion facilities on the grounds that the majority went private anyway - not because women from overseas had just as much need as British women for abortions".

"NAC's feminist prejudices led it to organise the abortion campaign around the bourgeois notion of individual freedom of choice".

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In another 'Women for Communism' article on students written by one Mick Hume (!) the word sexism appears throughout in quotation marks as if it is some figment of our imagination e.g. "(The NUS's) attention focused on the spectre of 'sexism'. The NUS has switched from campaigning for free abortion and nursery facilities and the right to social equality to arguing for banning striptease shows on campus. But why have they found it necessary to trivialise the fight for women's rights?"

I should add that in a previous issue of the same odious rag Reclaim the Night was attacked for leading to the increased harassment of prostitutes and for joining the capitalist press in calling for bourgeois censorship of pornography or words to that effect. Women's Aid was dismissed as "bourgeois social work". The Irish Women's Movement is described as even more bourgeois than its British counterpart.

At Central London Poly where I'm a student the antics of supporters of this sect have included OPPOSING a motion on sexism proposed by our Women's Group, OPPOSING a financial donation to WAVAW, OPPOSING a forthcoming NUS conference on the grounds that it is for women only then declaring their intention to send a delegate anyway.

On this last point you may be assured that they are totally opposed to women doing anything autonomously - as the student article states: "Such organisations would be autonomous only of working class politics" and so it goes on, and on, and on.

They are presumably opposed to WIRES for the same reason - I am amazed they had the nerve to advertise themselves in it. I suspect their intention is to try and attract women new to the movement who may not have analysed their feelings or come up with any specific conclusions about our oppression as women. Many students are in this position.

Anyway, that's the only explanation I can think of to account for why the RCP has any women members at all. In short, they've been duped - by men of course.

Although I believe that anyone finding themselves subjected to the puerile rhetoric of this particular group of headbangers should have no difficulty in relegating them to the outer reaches of the lunatic fringe, I still find it rather worrying that a group defining themselves as revolutionary socialist are prepared to put so much energy into vaunting their hatred of feminism and I urge all women to beware of them.

You have been warned.

Yours in sisterhood,
Marya Durham.

OUR REPLY WHICH APPEARED IN 'THE NEXT STEP', No 23, April 1982.

'You have been warned', concludes Marya Durham. Taking a leaf out of Mary Whitehouse's book, Durham has launched a crusade against the corrupting influence of Women for Communism.

The devil has been at work: women supporters of the RCP have been 'duped' - 'by men of course'. Durham is so annoyed that she forgets herself and uses the arguments of male chauvinist philistines the world over - that women are mindless morons who have been 'duped'. For her it is enough to provide a series of quotations and let pure fury do the rest. But let's look at the real points at issue.

It is true that Women for Communism aims to combat the traditions of feminism. That's because feminism is far from synonymous with the movement
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for the liberation of women. feminism is only one wing of the women's movement. Throughout history the women's movement has always been divided between feminists and communists.

For communist women the struggle for liberation is inseparable from that of the proletariat. The specific oppression of women is reproduced by capitalist social relations and will not be overcome until a new society is created. That's why any struggle for women's rights which is not anti-capitalist can lead to nothing more than the reorganisation of the forms of women's oppression. Feminism is hostile to many of the features of capitalism. But because they see the fight for women's equality as an end in itself, feminists restrict their operations to the terrain of reform. Worse, because they separate women's liberation from other social conflicts, they in practice reject the fight against capitalism.

In the real world no struggle can be waged autonomously from the battle between labour and capital. Like anybody else, women have to take sides on this matter. The history of the British women's movement is instructive here.

The feminist section of the Women's Social and Political Union - the Suffragettes - resented attempts to combine their campaigns with those of the working class movement. Interested in the advancement of women alone, they were embarrassed by the proletarian orientation of Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of the WSPU. In 1914 they therefore expelled the East London Federation from the WSPU. From that point onwards the distinct orientation of the two wings of the women's movement became clear. The East London Federation developed into an anti-imperialist and international force, while the WSPU went on to make a deal with the ruling class. In return for a limited franchise for women, the feminists became staunch supporters of the First World War and toured the country recruiting people to die in the trenches. Symptomatic of the feminist approach was the new name given to their newspaper - Britannia. Inevitably, the feminists opposed the Russian Revolution and the fight for Irish independence.

The history of the WSPU shows how the struggle of women against their oppression is never autonomous from the class struggle. While the feminists portrayed the success of Britain's war effort as the over-riding issue of the times, the communist women linked the fight to women factory workers in the East End with the overall battles of the working class. Nor was this divergence of strategy merely a British phenomenon. Throughout Europe, feminists became active participants in the carnage of 1914-18. Communist women, on the other hand, tried to turn the inter-imperialist war into a civil war between workers and bosses.

The more Marya Durham shouts 'autonomy', the more she reveals her dependence on the tired arguments of reformism. We support every step taken by women to fight their oppression, and believe that special women's organisations will be necessary to advance our cause. But such organisations will not be 'autonomous', but part of the struggles of the working class.

Marya Durham takes 'autonomy' as a self-evident truth. But feminism can no more be elevated above bourgeois and working class politics now than it could be in 1914. Today, their fondness for 'autonomy' notwithstanding, most leading feminists have chosen to realise their goals through the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Helen Swift,
Women for Communism.

LETTER FROM 'WOMEN AGAINST RAPE', BRITAIN, 16 February, 1982.

Dear Sister and Friends,

We are writing to ask you to endorse the enclosed letter to the Home Secretary.

Even the Prime Minister and the Attorney General now acknowledge that rape is not being adequately dealt with. Women who are raped are treated with suspicion and hostility, while rape is trivialised and even condoned. A crucial step in changing this situation is to make rape illegal inside marriage where it is still, by law, the husband's "conjugal right".

Public pressure is essential now to get this law changed. Please pass on copies of this letter to any other organisation you think may want to add their name: women's groups, trade union branches, political parties, social groups and clubs, etc.....

Hoping to hear from you soon,

Ruth E Hall
Women Against Rape

OUR REPLY, 12 April, 1982.

Dear Sister,

Thankyou for your letter of 16 February 1982. I enclose the letter from Women Against Rape to the Home Secretary, endorsed by myself on behalf of Women for Communism. We would like to clarify where we stand on the issue of rape within marriage.

Direct action against rape!

We are opposed to all forms of rape and every instance of the degradation and brutalisation of women - whoever perpetrates it, friend, stranger or husband. But we have no faith in the law either as it stands, or as amended to include the crime of rape within marriage. Neither women nor the working class can rely on the law, the police, the courts or on employers to deal with rape or with any form of sexual harassment. We have to take the law into our own hands and deal with rapists ourselves.

The law does not exist to protect women. As I am sure you are aware it was introduced to protect men. Women; virgins and wives, were regarded as the property of their fathers and husbands. As a result rape was seen as a violation of their property rights. The marriage contract still amounts to consent in the eyes of the law. We can certainly point out, as you do in your campaign, that this creates the anomaly - where 'mistresses' and 'cohabitees' have more rights than married women. But the point of marriage in capitalist society is to ensure that the children produced within it are fathered by the husband. Laws about the family and the institution of marriage have to be understood in the context of capitalist social relations. Consequently the fight against rape includes an assault on the form of the family which exists in this society and is necessarily oppressive.

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Abolish housework!

Women for Communism puts the fight against rape in the context of a fight against the family and the existence of privatised domestic work within it. In so far as your letter to Whitelaw emphasises the economic subordination of women within the family as being both a cause of rape and a barrier to fighting it, we are in full agreement. We differ with Women Against Rape in that we do not demand 'Wages for Housework', nor do we agree with those who argue for it to be shared by men and women. Our aim is the abolition of domestic work, the economic subordination of women that follows from it, and the creation of a socialist system in which women will achieve their liberation.

We would appreciate a reply to these points and more information on the campaign. Hoping to hear from you soon,

Kate Marshall,
Women for Communism.

REPLY FROM 'WOMEN AGAINST RAPE', 20 May, 1982.

Dear Kate,

Thankyou very much for your letter and the endorsement. Please forgive this long delay in replying to you but we have been completely snowed under with work, some people have been ill and some away.

We do agree with you about the law not protecting women and we have always felt that changing the law alone will not solve the problem, that is why we have always campaigned on all fronts. However we do feel that establishing a woman's body as her own property is important and a stepping stone towards a whole set of changes we want to make. Different members of WAR have different views on marriage but we all agree that violence of any kind in the home shouldn't be outside the law and prosecution. There are many changes we want to see but we feel to make rape in marriage a crime is really to knock the corner stone from a lot of chauvinist attitudes. We go fully into the whole question in our pamphlet 'The Rapist Who Pays the Rent' (see enclosed).

On the question of 'Wages for Housework'. Some women in WAR are for WfH and some are not but we are all agreed on financial independence as essential. It is not one of the aims of WAR. Since WfH meets at our centre and some of us are in WfH we naturally work very closely together. WfH does however also ultimately want to get rid of housework but to make housework even recognised as work they had to put a price on it. Anyway I am sending you the latest WfH bulletin so you can get an idea of the kind of things they do.

I hope this will have answered your questions. If there is anything else you would like to know please write. We would also be very interested in anything you are doing or planning to do.

Very best wishes,
Judit Kertisz,
Women Against Rape.

7 May, 1982.

Dear sisters,

I find your analysis of women's oppression in capitalist society pretty convincing, but I disagree completely with your suggestion that workers should maim rapists. It seems to me that you glorify violence in a way that is totally unacceptable to many women who are opposed to the violence and barbarity of capitalism. What guarantee is there that you've got the right man? Surely instead of witch-hunts we should defend the right of anyone to a fair trial, and by political pressure ensure the courts impose severe sentences on rapists.

Jenny T, Liverpool

OUR REPLY, 1 June 1982

Dear Jenny,

The working class has a long tradition of taking the law into its own hands, and dealing with its enemies in a direct and violent way. Engels refers to an occasion in 1822 when members of a weaver's association threw vitriol in the faces of two working-men who would not join the association, and were therefore regarded as traitors to their class. Both the assaulted lost the use of their eyes in consequence of the injury! And 'Knobsticks' (that is scabs) 'are usually threatened, insulted, beaten, or otherwise maltreated by members of the union; intimidated in short in every way'. 'Blacklegs' and 'scabs' were what workers sustained as a result of the kickings administered to their legs. In Soweto in 1976 school children caught a man who had raped their teacher and stoned him to death. The republican movement has shot or maimed those who betray their cause, including rapists.

In many cases the crime and the solution are different. Intimidation can take different forms. A man who sexually harasses female colleagues should be isolated and challenged. On the other hand if a woman or black person physically attacks her assailant then we would defend her to the hilt. Like Engels we don't glorify violence but recognise it as a legitimate response to attacks on the working class, in conditions where the police and courts are manifestly on the other side. If we are called upon to defend workers against racist attacks or to retaliate against rapists then we have no compunction in using violence against those who use it against our class.

On the question of do we have the right man and is our trial 'fair' - we take every possible step to ensure that the person concerned has done what he is accused of. The courts on the other hand assume that a rapist is innocent, and that the woman is to blame. A judge in Glasgow recently ruled that a woman has not been raped if sexually assaulted while 'virtually insensible' as a result of drinking too much, or if she is asleep! And the law still sees the marriage contract as consent. So a 'fair trial' is not something that is remotely plausible under capitalism.

I hope these points clarify our approach. We share your abhorrence of capitalism's brutalisation of the working class and attacks on those who oppose it. But if we reject violence against it we allow the ruling class and its agents to walk over the weakest sections of the working class - the women and the blacks.

Denise Taylor

11 May, 1982.

Dear Sabena,

I have been avidly reading the material on women in the next step and am looking forward to the forthcoming journal. However I feel that I cannot agree with your analysis of women's oppression which I feel displaces the discussion on to a level where the specific oppression of women as women, and the particular necessity for this under capitalism is ultimately distorted.

In comradeship,
Cathy S,
Reading.

OUR REPLY, 31 May, 1982.

Dear Cathy,

Sabena passed on your letter of 11 May, for me to reply on behalf of Women for Communism. You don't spell out where you disagree with our analysis, preferring to make a general criticism that we underestimate women's specific oppression. To answer this charge we must first elaborate the two responses to women's oppression which have characterised the Left in Britain since the 'sixties.

One response to women's oppression is to deny it, or to claim it is simply one aspect of class oppression. Tony Cliff uses sociological surveys on living conditions to indicate that working class women share most of their problems with working class men and bourgeois women are well off and have nothing in common with their working class 'sisters'. Now whilst this might be true enough superficially, in Cliff's hands these facts have reactionary political effects. The SWP winds up its work on women (ie Women's Voice groups) and tells the membership to support women workers in struggle, as if they were male trade unionists. The Militant Tendency go one step further and endorse reactionary ideas amongst male workers (eg 'Maggie Thatcher's got one, Keith Joseph is one' etc). It justifies ignoring women's oppression because it claims that fighting for women's specific interests only divides an already divided working class. Both groups, so eager to fraternise with miners, steel workers and dockers, capitulate to chauvinism in the working class, simply echoing the 'left' bureaucrats call for women to join the unions. This approach is known as economism.

Most other groups on the Left eg the CPGB, IMG and WSL adapt to feminism. They don't examine why capital oppresses women and divides the working class, rather they claim that male and female workers have fundamentally opposed interests. Men, they claim, benefit from women's oppression, in that they keep the best jobs for themselves and have their housework done for them. As a consequence these groups support the autonomy of the women's movement, positive discrimination and give prominence to issues like rape, pornography and sexism.

In fact the distinction between the two is not so clear - rarely will SWP members challenge feminism and many of the 'socialist feminists' in the CP, IMG and WSL will ignore 'sexism' when they are on the picket line.

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Women for Communism is opposed to both economism and feminism. We locate women's oppression under capitalism in the nature of the privatised domestic slavery that women workers carry out. This work is unpaid, but vital in reproducing the working class, getting it ready for exploitation in the factory. Working class men only benefit from this obliquely, for if domestic work were socialised then the working class as a whole would be rid of the burden. Bourgeois families already have the bulk of their domestic work socialised - nannies, private nurseries, nurses, domestic helps, cooks and gardeners work as employees, taking the toil out of domestic work for bourgeois women.

The ruling class also capitalises on the fact that women are domestic slaves, in the way it employs them. In social production women work less than men (less years and less hours) and so capital is able to employ them cheaper. One effect of this arrangement is that women don't get skilled work, overtime or the bulk of unsocial hours. That men do might leave them better paid, but they are still exploited by capital and a man is often forced to work longer and harder because his wife is so badly paid.

Our analysis indicates how it is that capital benefits at every juncture from the division of the working class. It gets workers in an exploitable condition, it gets skilled and unskilled labour in the proportion it requires, it has a group of workers who've always got a home to go to when there's too little work to go round and they have a politically divided workforce.

In these conditions revolutionaries intervene to show the unity of interests that male and female workers have in opposing oppression and exploitation - in the anti-capitalist struggle. It is inconceivable that male workers will be consistent opponents of capital unless they fight for women's jobs, against cuts in the facilities women require, for trade union recognition for women workers, for equal pay, for nurseries and abortion facilities etc. For in fighting with their sisters male workers will begin to appreciate their broader political interests as a class in an independent way. This is the task Women for Communism has set itself - and that is why we are such staunch opponents of those who deny women's specific oppression.

Kate Marshall,
Women for Communism

(If you want to learn more about our analysis of women's oppression --
watch out for REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PAPERS, no 9 -- coming your way SOON)

