



Real freedom

Women's liberation and socialism

KATE MARSHALL

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Real freedom

Women's liberation and socialism

Women's liberation has been at the centre of debate and controversy for a decade. Hundreds of books, magazines, articles and reports have investigated and appraised the position of women in modern society. But has anything really changed? Women today seem to be as far, if not further, from achieving social equality than they were 10 years ago.

In recent years the 'back to kitchen sink' brigade has regained the initiative once held by militant feminists. The women's movement has collapsed and attempts to revive its dynamic traditions have been all but abandoned. The episodic activities of isolated groups of feminists have become merely symbolic gestures – such as attacks on pornography shops – which avoid confronting the roots of women's oppression.

The leadership of the labour movement, in the trade unions and the Labour Party, has increasingly given up even token gestures of support for women's rights. At the 1982 Labour Party Conference the bureaucrats simply displayed irritation at attempts to discuss the problems facing working women.

So why another book exposing the subordinate position of women in society? Our aim is not to state the obvious – that women are oppressed by capitalism. We assume that the reader is sympathetic to the cause of women's liberation and set out to show the way to achieve it. This

book re-examines the oppression of women from a Marxist point of view. Its object is to clear up the confusion that has clouded the question of women's oppression and limited the effectiveness of struggles against it.

Much of the analysis and argument presented is new and it will arouse controversy and disagreement. For that reason, we have sought to substantiate the main lines of argument with statistical illustrations and practical examples. To keep the text reasonably concise and accessible, we have restricted the discussion to the British experience. However, we are confident that the analysis and strategy outlined here have a relevance to the position of women elsewhere.

Our main aim is to stimulate a reappraisal of existing strategies for women's liberation and justify our call for a new movement. For too long, women's struggles have been ghettoised. Reformist politicians and feminists have allowed vital issues of women's oppression to be isolated from working class politics. Special conferences organised by the TUC and the Labour Party in collusion with feminist activists have come and gone. But they have simply reflected the divisions that prevail between men and women in society, and done nothing to challenge them. We want to turn the tables on the bureaucrats and the feminists and put the fight for women's equality at the centre of the class struggle. We want the working class to fight for women's rights; and we want women to take their rightful place in the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system.

Real freedom opens with an assessment of the impact of the recession on women — at work, out of work, in the home and in the spheres of legal rights and public attitudes. It continues, explaining women's subordination as a consequence of the privatised nature of women's work as housekeepers and child rearers in capitalist society. Chapter 3 examines the inferior position into which women have been forced on the labour market as a result of their burden of domestic work. Next we assess the experience of state intervention in the lives of working class women, particularly exploring the restricted character of the legal rights that the ruling class has conceded to women.

The record of the labour movement — particularly the trade unions — on questions of women's emancipation is assessed in Chapter 5, which concludes with case studies of some of the major women's strikes of the last decade. Chapter 6 focuses on the women's liberation movement, and in particular, on the individualistic preoccupations that have rendered it ineffectual in the cause to which its members are dedicated. *Real freedom* concludes by outlining our perspective for a women's right to work campaign. We hope our readers will conclude that they should join us.

Chapter I



Women's oppression today

The recession has had a devastating effect on women at work. Between 1970 and January 1982 the percentage of women officially unemployed rose from 14 to nearly 30 per cent.¹ In addition, hundreds of thousands of unemployed women simply do not bother to register. Current estimates of the numbers of 'hidden unemployed' range from 300 000 of whom three-quarters are women, to one million of whom 900 000 are women.² The trend towards higher relative female unemployment is one of the features of the last few years. As the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) reported, 'unemployment has been increasing more rapidly amongst women than amongst men in recent years'.³

Throughout the 'sixties and 'seventies the number of women at work increased. Between 1961 and 1974, while more than half a million women were being thrown out of the production industries, another two million were absorbed into the service sector.⁴ Even during the last two years of the 'seventies female employment in the service sector grew by 227 000 to 9.5m.⁵ However, by 1980, as the Government settled into its 'medium-term' strategy, the process was reversed. During the first two years of the Tory Government the annual average percentage of unemployed women almost doubled.⁶

Even part-time women workers became superfluous to the needs of the system. Between September 1980 and September 1981, 197 000 part-time women workers were sacked. In the public and service sector industries, in which most women work, the expulsion of part-timers accounted for 84 600 out of a total of 170 000 redundancies.⁷

Not only are most part-time workers women, but the vast majority of them are married women. Imprisoned in the home by family responsibilities, their only avenue into the labour market is through part-time employment. As part-time work has become more difficult to find, married women have suffered most. Between 1976 and 1981 unemployment among married women increased three-fold.

Table 1 Unemployment among married women (Annual average in 000s)

1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
107.9	141.8	159.7	170.2	223.2	322.6

Source: *Department of Employment Gazette*, January 1982, from Table 2.1

Total women's employment in all industries and services fell by 678 000, from 9 341 000 to 8 663 000 between December 1979 and September 1981.⁸ Now women workers' prospects are bleaker still. Sectors such as the textile industry, traditionally a major source of female employment, are in terminal decline. Courtauld, the biggest British textiles group, has cut its UK workforce by 25 000 in the past two years.⁹ The growth in public sector employment, which accounted for a large proportion of the rise in women's jobs since the Second World War, has now halted. The civil service has been reduced from 732 300 in April 1979 to 675 400 in January 1982, and further reductions are planned to bring the workforce down to 630 000 by the end of 1983-84. This total reduction of 14 per cent will leave the civil service 'smaller than at any time since the Second World War'.¹⁰ Employment in local government was cut by 70 000 jobs, or three per cent, between March 1979 and September 1981; the Government has not failed to note the relatively small percentage fall here, and the March 1982 budget announced that 'further savings are envisaged'.¹¹ The process of rationalising the public services is only just beginning: women's employment prospects are seriously threatened as the state gears up for another sustained attack. Things are little better for those left in work. A woman worker's lot still consists of the worst jobs, worst wages and worst conditions.

Room at the bottom

Women employees in the civil service account for four per cent of senior management grades, between 70 and 80 per cent of clerical grades, and almost 100 per cent of secretarial workers.¹² In the same month that they released these statistics and called for 'affirmative action' to redress the situation, the civil service unions signed an agreement which 'offers the unions considerable consultation on the introduction of new technology, though it acknowledges that it will result in the loss of a number of jobs'.¹³ The computerisation of clerical work means that it is largely female redundancies that the unions are happy to 'acknowledge' in return for 'considerable consultation'. The pattern of low-paid employment and lack of positive union response is common to all sectors. The acceptance of women's primary role as housewives, and the subsequent 'acknowledgement' that their jobs should be the first to go, has meant that as male unemployment soars women are barely tolerated in the bottom layers of the workforce. Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts notwithstanding, employers have found it easy to keep women trapped in the lowest paid jobs.

Despite equal rights legislation, women's average pay in the public sector has actually *declined* in relation to men's. In the private sector, between 1978 and 1981, women workers' wages rose by 2½ per cent relative to men's — but this was more attributable to a fall in men's pay than to any rise in women's.¹⁴ By April 1981, women's average earnings were still less than two-thirds of men's. While only 15 per cent of men earned less than £80 a week, nearly 60 per cent of women workers' earnings were below that figure.¹⁵ A recent survey of 17 sectors where women's employment is concentrated has revealed that between 1975 and 1981, in only five sectors had women improved their earnings compared to the average man's wage, while eight groups of women workers had actually lost ground.¹⁶ Women's pay as a percentage of men's is steadily declining towards the position in 1975, when the Equal Pay Act (EPA) was introduced. Equal pay legislation has made no difference to the lives of women workers.

Some are more equal than others

'In 1970 the Equal Pay Act had been passed by a Labour Government with full Conservative support; and after the Conservatives came to power Maurice Macmillan, Secretary of State for Employment, had launched a campaign to prepare employers for its full implementation by December 1975.'¹⁷

Macmillan did his job well. By the time the Act was implemented in 1975, the bosses were fully 'prepared'. Their strategy was to leave the law

intact whilst making it meaningless for all but the most blatantly oppressed women. While the government's arbitration bodies have interpreted the Act in the bosses' favour, most employers have simply devised ways of getting around it.

The emphasis of the employers' reply to the EPA has been on increasing the segregation of their workforce, isolating more and more female workers in 'women's jobs'. Today nearly 40 per cent of all women workers are employed in women-only workplaces, and many more work in jobs for which there are no male equivalents. If there are no men working in the same job or grade, comparisons are impossible: low wages can be imposed on women without fear of the law. The bosses have been aided in their attempts to make women's work non-comparable by the long-standing concentration of women in service and clerical jobs, where they make up over 90 per cent of the workforce. In 1971, for example, before either the implementation of the Act or the onset of the crisis proper, 51.8 per cent of women workers were employed in these two sectors, compared to only 16.9 per cent of men.¹⁹ In these areas, it has been straightforward for employers to apply the 'women's work' label and beat the Act. Elsewhere they have removed male workers from previously mixed sectors of manufacturing industry, to create non-comparable jobs for women. A recent survey of two Greater Manchester factories, for example, shows that out of a combined total of 1000 shop floor jobs, no more than 12 were performed by both men and women.²⁰ Through a combination of the historical tendency for women to be concentrated and segregated into low paid jobs, and the crisis-inspired response of consciously 'streaming' the workforce, the bosses have remained within the law while manoeuvring around it.

In its attack on women workers' legal rights, the ruling class has been aided by the state's arbitration bodies, supposedly established to protect women's interests. The pattern of applications to industrial tribunals under the EPA exposes the tribunals' increasing reluctance to find against hard-pressed British capitalists. As both the percentages of applications heard and upheld have declined, women's disillusionment with their 'safeguards' means that fewer and fewer bother to apply (see table).

Having dealt swiftly with the worst excesses of discriminatory pay, the state soon lost any interest in trying to improve women's relative rates of pay. As the problems of Britain's bosses have increased, the tribunals have leant even more heavily towards the side of the employers. In a 1979 case, for example, a Court of Appeal ruled that an employer could *not* claim 'market pressures' as a reason for paying a woman less than her male predecessor, noting that 'if any such excuses were permitted,

the Act would be a dead letter'.²¹ Within two years the Act was just that. In a case brought under the EPA in 1981, the tribunal decided that:

'It is open to an employer to pay a woman less than her male predecessor for doing the same job where it can be shown that the difference in pay is due to a change in the economic circumstances of the business.'²²

The recession is now legally accepted as justifying discriminatory pay for women.

Table 2 Applications to tribunals under the Equal Pay Act

Year	Applications made	Applications heard (as % of total)	Applications upheld (as % of those heard)
1976	1742	709 (41%)	213 (30%)
1977	751	363 (48%)	91 (25%)
1978	343	80 (23%)	24 (30%)
1979	263	78 (30%)	13 (17%)
1980	91	26 (29%)	4 (15%)
1981	54	27 (50%)	6 (22%)

Source: *EOC Annual Reports*, Nos 1-6, 1976-81

A woman's work is never done

'I should like to see married women carrying on with their jobs.'
(Margaret Thatcher, 1952)²³

'I feel very, very strongly that women should not leave their children to come home to an empty house.' (Margaret Thatcher, 1980)²⁴

Even during periods of expansion and low unemployment, women's position as housewives is only marginally improved. In the crisis, as both income and services are slashed, it is considerably worsened. Pushed out of the labour force and back into the home, women face both material and ideological assaults from politicians, employers and their apologists in the media. While the services on which women rely are sacrificed in the interests of reducing public spending, the government harangues women to 'fulfil their responsibilities' to their families. The concern expressed by Mrs Thatcher and her Government over the fate of 'latchkey kids' does not stretch to protecting their standards of education or health; its function is to emphasise the virtues of domestic work.²⁵

As the income of the family falls, the task of making ends meet becomes harder and the level of household drudgery required to maintain the working class intensifies. For the increasingly large numbers of women forced to sustain their families on state benefits, things are still worse.

Faced with the necessity of cutting public spending, the state has forced down the real level of benefits. In 1978 six per cent of the unemployed got less than half of what they had earned when working. By 1982, 36 per cent were getting less than half of their previous earnings.²⁶ Relative to average pay, unemployment benefit has now fallen back to 1951 levels. The methods of achieving the decline have been simple: taxing benefits, keeping rises in basic benefit beneath the rate of inflation, and abolishing earnings-related supplements.

The attack on the value of unemployment benefit has resulted in a record rise in the number of people claiming supplementary benefits – it reached four million in March 1982.²⁸ While millions of married women are forced to maintain their families on a miserably inadequate supplementary benefit, single parents have suffered worst. In 1978, 90 per cent of the 100 000 men who headed one-parent families were able to work to meet their needs.²⁹ In that same year, there were 725 000 single-parent families headed by women; by 1980 320 000 such families relied on supplementary benefit to maintain them.³⁰ Excluded from the labour market, these women are forced to live below the 'poverty-line'. Yet for some, the situation is worse still. It is only because single mothers are bringing up their families alone that they can claim benefit at all. Supplementary benefit is not available to married or 'cohabiting' women (their husbands or cohabitees must claim a still smaller dependents' allowance for them), and in the eyes of the state 'cohabitation' can mean anything at all. As the number of unmarried women claiming benefits has increased, so the state has sunk to new depths in its attempts to deny women benefit by labelling them as 'cohabitees' and increasing penalties for 'offenders'. One 21 year-old woman was denied benefit by the DHSS, who told her to 'leave it to them to decide who her boyfriend is'.³¹ Another 24 year-old mother of two was jailed for six months for defaulting on repaying the £1000 she obtained 'fraudulently' while cohabiting.³² New snooping procedures mean that nine out of every 10 lone mothers heading families and claiming supplementary benefit could be investigated for fraud.³³

The restriction of women's access to state benefits doesn't end with supplementary benefit. Family Income Supplement can pressurise single mothers into working longer hours, because they have to go to work for at least 24 hours a week to qualify. In two-parent families FIS can only be claimed by a working father. If he is unemployed, but his wife is working, she cannot claim the benefit for her family. Child benefit, vital for many working class women's access to fulfil their families' daily needs, has been paid monthly from March 1982.³⁴ On top of these restrictions and attacks, successive governments have fought to keep rises in all family

benefits below the rate of inflation, with some notable successes. The maternity grant, for example, has stood at £25 since 1965; to have maintained its value since then, it would need to have been £99.50 in 1980.³⁵

The blatant discrimination against married women in social security law, to a large extent based upon the 1942 Beveridge Report's assumption that a married woman is automatically a dependent of her husband,³⁶ has been increasingly useful to the bosses in the crisis. It has eased the task of shifting the responsibility of maintaining the working class from the state onto the family. However, the British ruling class has had to deal recently with some unwanted interference from the EEC. A community directive of December 1978,³⁷ requiring member states to 'equalise' their main contributory social security systems by November 1984, has meant that the British state will probably have to give up its discrimination against women when granting supplementary benefits and Family Income Supplements. Britain's response has been two-fold. First, the government has made sure that certain benefits that particularly affect women's position as housewives are excluded from the directive. Second, it has introduced plans for legislation to make it still harder for women to obtain unemployment benefit.

The benefits specifically excluded from the directive are the Invalid's Care Allowance (ICA) and the Housewives' Non-Contributory Invalidity Pension (HNCIP). The invalidity allowance is available to all men and single women who stay at home to care for disabled relatives or friends. Married and cohabiting women are not eligible. The invalidity pension is supposedly available to disabled married women. To claim their equivalent allowance, men and single women have only to show that they cannot work, but married women must prove that they are incapable of 'normal household duties'. Experience has shown that if a married woman can only stand with a frame, has to crawl upstairs, but is capable of cooking whilst propped up in front of a stove, she is not eligible. Under capitalism, married women are little more than domestic slaves. Carrying their children to bed on their backs, or crawling around the kitchen, are 'normal household duties', and the state will not pay for them. Working women are expected to pay for the bosses' crisis not only from their pockets but with their health.³⁸

Now that the EEC has laid Beveridge to rest, the British state has had to wheel out another report to justify more discrimination against women as a short-cut to the public sector cuts the crisis demands. Marks and Spencer's boss Sir Derek Rayner produced his report in November 1980, and the test-run for his proposals began in October 1981. Aimed at tightening up 'work-shy' workers' access to benefits, Rayner's report has par-

ticularly harsh implications for women. His proposal that 'the new criterion for availability for work should be willingness to accept another job on similar terms to the last one' is guaranteed to keep women in the lowest paid jobs.³⁹ Another proposal, that mothers of young children be required to produce a letter from a 'responsible adult' who would be willing to act as a childminder before they can be considered available for work, has still broader implications. The state accepts no obligation to provide childcare facilities for working women — mothers now have to produce evidence that they have arranged private childcare for their children before they can even be considered as part of the labour force and entitled to unemployment benefit. The Rayner Report is far more than an attack on women's access to state benefits. It also indicates what is probably the most crucial aspect of the intensification of domestic work and the most important restriction on women's employment: the increasing inadequacy of state nursery provision.

Who cares?

Statisticians are fond of detailing the 'progress' made in providing day-care for children under five, most recently proclaiming that the number of full day-care places per thousand children under five in Great Britain rose from 27 in 1972 to 40 in 1980.⁴⁰ Seen from a working class point of view, however, these statistics mean that in 1980 only four per cent of children under five had access to full day-care places. A closer look at developments in childcare during the crisis, particularly the widening gap between state and private facilities, reveals an even more desperate picture.

Table 3 Day nursery places (full and part-time) in England and Wales

1945	62 784
1950	42 410
1955	28 024
1960	22 564
1965	21 396
1970	21 581
1974	24 772
1976	30 000 (3000 of which were part-time)
1978	32 000 (4000 of which were part-time)

Source: 1945-74 J Tizard et al, *All our children*, 1976, Table 4
 1976-78 *Social Trends*, HMSO, 1981, Table 3.4

The nursery facilities provided by the state have little to do with alleviating women's domestic burden and allowing their entry into the labour force. They are little more than an appendage of the social security system, an inadequate net to catch those women the state considers to be incompetent at one of their prime tasks under capitalism: child-rearing. Established to provide subsistence care for the children of teenage and single mothers, prisoners' wives and baby-batterers, local authority facilities bear no relation to the increasing demand for day-care.⁴¹ This is reflected in the substantial decline in the number of day-care places provided by the state even during the post-war boom, at a time when the massive increase in the number of married women working meant demand for such services was rocketing.

Paradoxically, the apparent reversal in the decline of places open since 1970 is itself a symptom of the crisis. Given the 'special needs' nature of state day-care provision, the brutalisation of the working class in the crisis and the consequent breakdown of the traditional family structure has forced the state to provide more places for those who cannot cope. Even with that increase, the number of local authority day nursery places available by the end of the 'seventies was little more than half what it had been at the end of the Second World War.

The fall in the number of places available in state nurseries since 1945 took place at a time of soaring demand for day-care facilities, as the post-war boom drew thousands of married women into the workforce.

Table 4 Economic activity rate of married women, Great Britain (per cent)

1931	1951	1961	1971	1981
10	21.7	29.7	42.3	48.8

Source: *EOC Fifth Annual Report*, 1980, Table 3; *Department of Employment Gazette*, April 1981

As a result of the failure of the state to provide for the increased demand, private nurseries have enjoyed their own boom. In the 30 years from 1949 to 1978, the number of full and part-time day-care places available in private nurseries in England and Wales increased by almost 6000 per cent to 414 000.⁴²

Rather than providing women with the opportunity to compete with men for full-time jobs, however, the nature of private facilities has ensured that female workers are kept where capital wants them – in part-time jobs. Where full-day places in private nurseries increased by only 6000 between 1970 and 1978, part-time places rose by 159 000. Of the 414 000

private nursery places available in 1978, 388 000 or almost 95 per cent were only part time.⁴³ Private nurseries reflect the needs of capitalism in crisis; once again, it is women who have to pay. Yet the high cost of private nurseries prohibits many working class women from using even these limited facilities. They are forced to turn to the least adequate form of childcare of all, 'official' or 'unofficial' child-minders. As more working class women have gone out to work for a living, the number of full and part-time places with registered child-minders in England and Wales has risen, from 1700 in 1949 to 100 000 in 1978.⁴⁴ By 1980 child-minders accounted for 57 per cent of full day-care places in Great Britain.⁴⁵ These miserable facilities are the last recourse of women with no other option, and many working class women would rather leave their children with relatives and neighbours. In recent decades child-minding has become a veritable growth industry. Badly run and badly supervised toddler groups have been set up on an informal basis. Estimates of the numbers of 'un-registered' child-minders range from 100 000 to 300 000 in England alone.⁴⁶

The other side of day-care provision is the nursery school facilities provided by the Department of Education. The Department claims an impressive record over the last decade; whereas the number of children receiving a nursery education increased by only 12 000 between 1950 and 1970, in the next decade it rocketed by 132 000 to 215 000 children in 1980.⁴⁷ As always the headline statistics conceal a much less rosy picture. Full-time nursery places actually fell by 47 000 between 1965 and 1980, to only 14 000. Over the same period, part-time nursery school places increased from 8000 to 34 000. But the real increase in nursery education came in primary school provision for under-fives. Full-time places increased by 74 000 to 230 000; part-time places in primary schools accounted for most of the increase, rising from 10 000 to 15 000 by 1980.⁴⁸ But such increases have brought scant benefits for women. Not only have the vast majority of them been in part-time places, but the hours during which part-time nursery education normally takes place — early to mid-morning — mean that even part-time jobs become difficult to fit in. Neither does nursery education benefit mothers with very young children. Most places are taken up by children who are almost of school age anyway. In 1979, for example, while 55 per cent of the population aged four were receiving some form of nursery or infant education, only 19 per cent of three year-olds were in a similar position.⁴⁹ Those under three rarely get a look in. The shift away from nursery schools proper and full-time education has closed another childcare option for many working class women. In doing so, it has saved the state both current and capital expense,

through lost teaching jobs (almost exclusively women's) and less new nursery school building. A similar dual saving, resulting from a double-edged attack on women's position as workers and housewives, has also been made in another sector which directly affects the intensity of domestic work: facilities for the care of old people.

State provision for old age pensioners has not escaped the public sector axe. Cuts in old people's homes, home-helps and meals-on-wheels services mean more than declining services for the old. They also lead to more women losing their jobs and, more broadly, far more women being forced to care for ageing relatives at home. Of the local authorities' social services departments replying to a 1980 survey, 95 per cent intended making substantial cuts in their facilities for the aged between 1979 and 1981. During 1980 and 1981, 75 per cent planned cuts in old people's homes (13 homes had already been closed and seven new ones remained unopened). Sixty per cent expected to cut their home-help services, 65 per cent projected cuts in meals-on-wheels, and many authorities had pushed their charges for those meals up by 40 per cent. Cuts were reported in everything from holidays to televisions.⁵⁰ In addition to these attacks, old people have to wait longer before being admitted to a home, thus forcing women to care for the aged well beyond the point where the need for state aid becomes obvious. All of this adds up to an increase in the expense and drudgery involved in women caring for the old. However, it is not only the cuts in state services for the very young and old which have increased the burden of domestic work. There is now a growing possibility of working class women either having more children to look after, or paying money they can little afford for private health care facilities, as the state cuts back another important service relating directly to women and their social position: abortion.

The 1967 Abortion Act was passed at the close of Britain's post-war boom. Almost as soon as it had been enacted, the effects of the coming crisis forced the state to resume its destruction of women's abortion rights. In 1969, 54 800 legal abortions were performed — a ratio of 5.3 abortions per 1000 women of child-bearing age. Of these abortions 67 per cent were carried out on the National Health Service. The peak year for legal abortions was 1973 when 167 100 were carried out. But although the number of NHS abortions continued to rise, state abortion provisions were clearly failing to keep pace with demand; the NHS share of abortions performed was down to 50 per cent. By 1980, legal abortions totalled 163 000, but NHS provision accounted for a mere 46 per cent, a fall of 21 per cent since 1969. As state abortion facilities fail to fulfil the demand, the gap is filled by charities and private clinics. Now the charities are in deep

water too. The percentage of legal abortions they carry out has dropped from a peak of 29 per cent in 1977 to 25 per cent in 1980, while the share of the 'market' controlled by the private, profit-making clinics has risen from 20 per cent to 29 per cent in the same period.⁵¹ As privatisation increases, so the cost rises, and abortion moves beyond the reach of more and more working class women.

Some women's access to NHS abortions has been restricted still further, either by their nationality or by the domination of Regional Health Authorities by religious bigots. Overseas citizens are always at the back of the queue for state health care. In the first quarter of 1981, for example, 8737 legal abortions were carried out on 'non-residents' in England and Wales – only 57 of them on the NHS.⁵² In some areas British women suffer from almost the same degree of privatisation. The influence of Roman Catholic gynaecologists on the West Midlands Regional Health Authority, for example, meant that of the 14 050 legal abortions carried out in that area in 1980, only 3013 were performed on the NHS.⁵³ This shift of available abortions from the state to the private sector is at the base of a deep-rooted attack on women's abortion rights. Much-publicised cases – such as the removal of the 'social clause' from the form on which doctors authorise abortions – are extreme instances in a general drive to reduce the availability of abortion. Because this increases working class women's responsibility for childcare, this attack forms a central feature of the intensified oppression of women in the present recession.

The ideological offensive

The restriction of women's rights in the recession has been accompanied by the revival of traditional attitudes to women and public values regarding their role in society. In many cases the purpose of this ideological attack is transparent. In the past, when there was a shortage of labour, women were urged to go out and work, now they are told to stay at home. When Margaret Thatcher recommended women to combine 'marriage and a career' in 1952, she added her view that the 'idea that the family suffers is, I believe, quite mistaken'.⁵⁴ Thirty years later Thatcher changed her view and warned: 'Material goods can never be a substitute for loving care'.⁵⁵

Thatcher is a forthright exponent of the interests of her class. But the ideological attack is much broader than the rantings of a few hard-nosed Tories. It is a spontaneous process which arises from the needs of the system for greater order and stability. The family thus acquires new

virtues for bourgeois public opinion. And in these times of insecurity the ideal housewife becomes the model held up for every woman to aspire towards.

For the ancient Greeks, Diana was the goddess of the moon. For modern British capital, she is the goddess of *The Sun*. The image of the pure, virgin-bride Princess, married young and already a mother, is obvious headline fodder for the gutter press. But it is also a powerful symbol for the bourgeoisie to wield in its assault on women's rights. The Princess appears as the living proof of Mrs Thatcher's assertion that 'the battle for women's rights has largely been won', and that 'most women know a successful society is founded on dignity, reticence and discipline'.⁵⁶ Images such as these are counterposed to the uncaring mothers who go out of work, leaving their 'latchkey kids' to fend for themselves.

The great stress now laid on the value of family life does serve an important purpose for the ruling class, in that it involves acceptance of a woman's primary role as being directly and individually responsible for ensuring the well-being of the working class. Consequently, any opportunity women get to go out to work, no matter how badly paid, should be viewed as a favour, not as a right. More broadly, however, the new elevation of the institution of the family on to a social pedestal is at the centre of the bourgeoisie's ideological assault on the working class. It is part of its attempt to stiffen working class support for the defence of British capital, by a reassertion of the national character.

A common theme in all of the debates now taking place is the desire to throw out those modern institutions and attitudes which have accompanied the decline of British imperialism, and to rebuild the qualities that made Britain great. The 'Falklands factor' in British politics, which existed long before the war in the South Atlantic, now impinges more and more on even the most domestic of spheres. Broad political issues are introduced not only into industrial disputes, but also into the question of the decline of family life, as the state strives to cope with an ever-deepening crisis of world capitalism. The government aims to combat the tendencies towards social fragmentation and chaos by promoting more and more vigorously the most basic institution for holding bourgeois society together. The ideological weapon of the family as a constant feature of the British way of life is put to effective use. Examples such as that of Princess Diana, or the prime-time television pictures of the heroes of the Falklands returning to the arms of their wives and children, provide emotive material for the capitalist media machine to exploit.

The overlapping of the concepts of the nation and family reached new heights in the tabloids some time before the Falklands coverage took it

completely over the top. The *Daily Star* announced that American men were queueing up to marry English girls because 'they were inclined to be more loving and faithful'.⁵⁷ The *Daily Mail's* women's page warned that '“faithful” is a forgotten word for French wives. . . will we be next?'.⁵⁸ The message is clear: as *The Times* put it, 'Stable family life is of fundamental importance to the well-being of our society'.⁵⁹ The apparently peculiarly British quality of faithful, domesticated wives must be at the centre of 'our' national regeneration. The Tories put the point most coherently. Soon after his arrival in office, Patrick Jenkin, then Minister for Health and Social Security, pinpointed the reconstitution of traditional family values as integral to overcoming Britain's industrial decline, establishing social stability and containing the aspirations of the working class both domestically and industrially:

'Mothers should be encouraged to look after their children full-time instead of going out to work. . . the increasing turbulence of modern life, with rising crime, industrial disruption, violence and terrorism (is) rooted in the separation of children from their parents.'⁶⁰

The reduction of women's lives to subservient domestic chores finds a degree of resonance in the labour movement. The capitalist class has always been successful in manipulating sexual divisions within the working class. Today, once again, we see the bosses rediscovering prejudices against women as a prelude to a more comprehensive attack on the working class. It is time to fight back! It is our job to define what is and what isn't an acceptable role for women in society. Unless the working class adopts the struggle against the oppression of women as its own it will be unable to break free of the chains that bind it to the system.

Chapter 2



How women in labour keep capital in power

Over the past 100 years women have won a number of important democratic rights: the right to vote, the right to abortion and divorce in certain circumstances, equal property rights and maternity rights. It is illegal in Britain to discriminate on the grounds of sex and to pay women less than men for a particular job. On paper at least, the position of women looks good. In Margaret Thatcher's words, 'the battle for women's rights has been largely won'.¹

Yet despite legal advances, in every important respect, women remain second class citizens. In every sphere of social life they have been unable to achieve as much as men or to participate to the same degree. Women are absent from positions of power and remain economically subjugated.

What is oppression?

Oppression as a social and political problem only emerged with the development of capitalism. Before capitalism and the development of a distinct bourgeois outlook it was taken for granted that society was by nature unequal. The social hierarchy was not seen as a negative phenomenon –

indeed it was accepted that everybody had their place in society and that this was ordained by God.

In pre-capitalist society inequality was depicted as natural and the concept of equality was alien to social thought. The inegalitarian ideology reflected the low level of the development of the forces of production where differences between people and regions appeared to be entirely the result of personal, geographical and climatic factors.

Freedom and equality were the watchwords of the bourgeois revolution. The restrictive feudal hierarchy became a barrier to the development of the forces of production and the capitalist class imposed its freedom on society. The overthrow of feudal relations was a positive development. But the new freedom and equality operated only in a restricted sense. On paper everybody can be equal. But the freedom to own capital means that some are more equal than others. The freedom to accumulate capital means the freedom to exploit the working class.

In capitalist society it is always said that everybody is equal before the law. But this equality presupposes social *inequality* between the capitalists and those they exploit. The unequal relationship between worker and employer is not the only example of a contradiction between the bourgeoisie's commitment to equality and the reality of capitalist society. Many of the inequalities that pre-dated capitalism – for example that between men and women – were simply extended and reinforced by the new system of production. At the same time capitalism extended throughout the world and introduced new forms of inequalities, for instance, between imperialist and backward capitalist countries.

The entrepreneurs' emphasis on freedom expresses the drive to remove all obstacles to the accumulation of capital. But the greater the freedom for capital accumulation, the more its egalitarian principles are violated in practice. Thus for the first time *oppression* arises as a specific social and political problem. In its early stages the existence of inequality was justified on the grounds that some were more able than others – men were more capable than women, Europeans were more intelligent than Africans. Through these devices the bourgeoisie could maintain its formal commitment to equality while blaming the oppressed for their inferior position. As time passed and the character of the class struggle changed, the ruling class granted reforms so that some of the grosser violations of the principle of equality were corrected through law.

But legal reforms only show how deep-rooted oppression really is. No matter what changes have been made in the law, the unequal relationship between men and women has changed remarkably little: it is reproduced spontaneously by the day to day operation of capitalist society.

The oppression of women

The subordination of the female sex is not specific to contemporary capitalist society but stretches back through different historical epochs. It seems to be a fact of life that women are inferior to men whatever the social system. Yet on closer examination it becomes clear that previous forms of *domination* are distinct from the *oppression* of women under capitalism.

In pre-capitalist society the domination of women had a natural or technical basis. The low level of the development of the forces of production emphasised natural and biological differences. The sexual division of labour that arose in these circumstances placed women in an inferior role, primarily because of women's role as childbearers. Later, with the rise of private property, this role was consolidated and women themselves acquired the status of men's property.

Capitalism took over the previously established sexual division of labour and the family despite its capacity to abolish their natural/technical basis. The creation of large-scale socialised production, the development of technology and science and the destruction of feudal barriers showed that capital could dismantle or transform ancient customs and relations that stood in its way. However, those traditional institutions which could serve a new function were integrated into the system. One such institution was the family; others were the state, class oppression and the domination of women.

Although the family and the domination of women persisted, they took new forms. Their persistence today is the result, not of technical, but of *social* factors. Thus only a social revolution can abolish women's oppression.

The oppression of women is *specific* to capitalism. It is no longer due to the underdevelopment of the forces of production but to the restrictions imposed by capitalist social relations. As we shall see in the next section, capital directly benefits from the oppression of women. One important feature of the capitalist oppression of women is that women's role as workers outside the household is severely restricted. Before capitalism, the sexual division of labour was a more or less direct reflection of the social division of labour. As a result, women played a full role in the work of society. In capitalist society this is no longer the case. Social production exists in isolation from family life and there is a privatised sphere of housework or domestic work. Women are forced into the home and their participation in social production is continually restricted by the necessity to perform domestic work.

Freedom and equality between men and women in capitalist society is a fiction. The existence of domestic work turns women into domestic

slaves. And women deprived of the right to play a full role in social life become less equal than men. The legal restrictions on the rights of women, which are not so significant today as in the past, only express the inferior social position of women. It is not the law but the existence of a distinct sphere of privatised domestic work which is at the root of the oppression of women.

Domestic work

Capitalism did not invent domestic work. The domestic sphere of production, the raising of children, the maintenance of the family on a day to day basis, long pre-dates the rise of capitalism. What capitalism did was to change the status of domestic work in society. It was transformed from a social activity into a private service. How does the capitalist class benefit?

The economic role of the family and capitalist production

Capitalism certainly needs domestic work. Without the time and effort spent by women to ensure the physical survival of the working class, the capitalists would soon find themselves with no workers to exploit. But capitalists can leave the drudgery of survival and reproduction to the working class itself, in particular to women. While the capitalists busy themselves making profits in their factories, they can rely upon the instinct of self-survival to provide them with the human material they need to keep their machinery going.

In the capitalist factory, there are pressures to maximise productivity, cut costs, cut out waste, introduce the latest technology and supervise the expenditure of every hour's labour. The capitalist must do this to survive in the market. The pressure of competition means that only the work done efficiently, which meets the average set by others in the market, is worth paying for. Inefficient companies are systematically eliminated and investment moves into the more profitable areas. Through this continual process of destruction and reconstruction, the capitalist system of production sustains its own dynamic as it heads towards its ultimate collapse. Despite the waste of labour on a social scale through crises and unemployment, in the individual capitalist enterprise parsimony prevails as the boss intensifies work and watches every minute.

How different from the work situation in the home! Here work re-

mains individualised. Rather than operating as part of a productive mechanism, in the limited way that capital socialises productive activity in the factories, here the woman works alone, cleaning, ironing, looking after the children. Here work remains drudgery. Countless hours are spent with no regard to cost and with little benefit from the technology that the capitalist depends upon for his very survival.

Different criteria operate in the capitalist firm and the working class home regarding the work done by their respective inmates. This distinction results from the nature of the modern working class. The establishment of capitalist production creates a working class which, as Marx pointed out, is 'free' in a double sense. It is free to sell its labour-power, its ability to work, to the capitalist employers. It is also free from ownership of the means of production: workers do not own land, machinery, raw materials, factories that they can use to produce what they need to survive. Hence, they are forced to sell their labour-power to the capitalists for a wage in order to live.² In societies based on slavery the worker was sold once and for all, in person, to the employer. The slave owner had to reckon with all the expenses of maintaining the slave in a fit condition to work. The capitalist employer buys the free wage-labourer only for a specific period of time. In fact, he buys only the worker's labour-power, the capacity to work, for a certain period of time in return for a wage. This wage tends to equal a value equivalent to the cost of the goods the worker must buy in order to live. But while this value has to be handed over by the capitalist, he does not have to take into account the work performed in the home to transform these goods into actual means of subsistence. In other words, the capitalist employer pays the worker a wage with which to purchase the necessities of life — food, clothing, etc — but does not have to concern himself with the time spent by the worker's family in cooking, mending, cleaning, etc.

The capitalists rely for their profits on the fact that the money they pay workers in wages is less than the value the workers create in production. Their aim is to minimise their wage costs in order to maximise their profits. The employers are highly satisfied with a system in which the need for female drudgery in the home is met at the expense of the working class, and to no cost to capital.

The sphere of domestic work is linked to capitalist production, yet is distinct and separate from it. The link consists in the way the capitalists depend upon domestic work to ensure that workers are able to turn up at their jobs in a fit state to slave away profitably for them, and to ensure that, over time, the working class is reproduced. However, except for demanding this end result, the capitalists take little interest in what goes

on in the home and activities performed there lie outside of the sphere of capitalist reckoning. Domestic work is entirely split off from social production in bourgeois society. That is why for women it is the ultimate 'dead-end job' with no prospects. While advances in modern technology put men on the moon, capitalism has been unable to free women from the kitchen sink.

The changing form of domestic work

Is it really the case that for women nothing ever changes? Surely there have been great advances in women's position over the years? It is true that the position of women in capitalist society *has* changed, but it is even more striking how domestic work continues to determine women's inferior social status.

Today a much higher proportion of women go out to work than was the case even 30 years ago. But the fact that women are more likely to take up paid employment does not mean that they do less domestic work. Rather, the time for domestic work is found before leaving for a job in the morning, during lunch breaks (shopping, for instance), and after the woman comes home from work in the factory or office. The burden of responsibility for childcare still falls on women, thus restricting their availability for waged work. The range of domestic duties and obligations they discharge conditions the kinds of jobs that are open to them and provides the rationale for capitalism to give women worse terms of employment and wages than men. Even the most favourable sign of progress for women under capitalism — that their lives are not as restricted as they once were to the narrow circle of domesticity — is constrained and hedged around with all kinds of qualifications.

What about domestic work itself: is there any evidence of progress here? Increases in living standards over the past few decades — as higher productivity has reduced the cost of the necessities of life and brought many new commodities within the reach of working class families — have meant that some changes have taken place. Workers more often go out for meals, or they can buy various convenience foods, thus reducing the burden of cooking for the family. Consumer durables such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines can also lighten the drudgery of cleaning and doing the laundry. But capitalism throws up barriers in this area too.

First, the capitalist system of production creates an absolute barrier beyond which these improvements cannot go. Because capital only buys labour-power in the market and there is no question of the worker himself being bought and sold outright, then there has to remain some time during which the worker must fend for himself, outside of the jurisdiction

of the employer. While in this period it may be possible to purchase commodities or various services to reduce the burden of domestic work, it is not possible to remove this burden entirely. This would amount to capitalism taking over complete responsibility for the reproduction of the working class, something which it has no interest in doing since it wants to purchase labour-power on the cheapest possible terms. Capitalism has no interest in bringing all domestic functions into the sphere of commodity relations, because this would mean a greater cost to capital for the labour-power which was previously brought to market for it on the cheap. Nor has it any real tendency to do so, because the capitalists know they can rely on the family and women's domestic work to do this for them.

Second, capitalism even restricts the extent of the relative improvements. To begin with, a washing machine, for example, may make things easier for the woman, but the work still remains privatised, domestic toil. Besides this, such improvements depend upon living standards continuing to rise. Once capitalism falls into crisis, as it is doing today, the tendency of the bosses to cut real wages hits working class expenditure on these newly-won luxuries. Many consumer durable goods were only placed within the reach of working class families through the extension of consumer credit in the first place. Now that unemployment is reaching record levels and those in work are having their wages held down, unmodified drudgery is the order of the day.

Finally, we should note the role of the state in relation to the functions of domestic work. The functions now subsumed by the 'welfare state', primarily the education and health care of the working class, were once carried out in rudimentary form by the family. Women taught their children and looked after the sick in the home. The fact that education and health care were only elementary is unimportant — at that stage it was adequate to the reproduction of the working class. As capitalism advanced and the forces of production developed, it made greater demands on the working class. Illiteracy and disease became barriers to capital accumulation. At first, private capital took on some of these functions, until the costs of running schools and hospitals became prohibitive. The establishment of the state education system and the National Health Service this century could then be justified in terms of capital's need for a more effective labour force. The role of the family as provider of these services became limited to childcare up to the age of five and in the field of health to the old and infirm. Capital took on responsibility, and paid out of its profits, only for certain aspects of the education and physical maintenance of the working class.

Capitalism, however, sets limits on the state's interference in family functions as well — limits determined by the demands of profitability. On the one hand, the degree to which any domestic functions are aided by the state is determined by whether this is necessary for the profitable expansion of investment or for securing the interests of the capitalist class as a whole (as in the case of war-time state funded nurseries). On the other hand, capital will not go further than it can afford. That is why today, in a period of recession, we see the cutting back of social services across the board.

Whatever incidental benefits there may have been for women as a result of state intervention in social services, it is clear that now things are going into reverse. With profitability at an all-time low, the capitalist state will not spend money on services that it can get the working class to perform for nothing. Women workers are generally responsible for taking on the additional burden of family responsibilities once the prop of state support is withdrawn, as many studies have shown. This extra burden is often taken on at the same time as losing a job, revealing that even limited improvements in the position of women are conditional on the level of capital accumulation.

The struggle within the family

Men are spared from domestic toil because women do it. Men can enter social production relatively unhindered and gain a wide range of skills and experiences which are denied to women. This allows men to dominate society and exercise power over their wives. Within the family women are economically dependent on their husbands.

Male domination is not the result of any personal attachment to a patriarchal mentality; it is an inseparable feature of the normal working of capitalist society. Moreover, although men are dominant and all men have some power — even if it is only over the family — the exercise of political power is not sexually determined. Power is determined by the ownership of capital.

While the capitalist class benefits from the oppression of women, working class men do not. The few shreds of privilege enjoyed by working class men are far outweighed by the effects of the sexual division of the proletariat. These divisions strengthen competition for jobs and resources and weaken the power of the proletariat. Though working class men become complicit in the oppression of women, it is the capitalist class that

really benefits from competition between male and female workers. It keeps wages down and weakens resistance to the rule of capital.

The main function of the family is not to buy men off, to provide them with a haven and a stake in male supremacist society. It is there to reproduce the labour-power of workers so that they can be exploited by capital. It is this vital function that explains the persistence of the working class family. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the working class does not need the family as a means of passing on property. The proletarian family survives because of the necessity for domestic work.

The privatised character of domestic work atomises the family unit. Because of the individualised character of the experience of family life, the family itself tends to act as a buffer against collective action. The ruling class always praises the virtues of the family because it sees in it an instrument of class control. The inward looking character of this institution with its emphasis on private relations strengthens conservative values in the proletariat. It will continue to do so as long as domestic work remains separated from social production.

The liberation of women and the overthrow of capitalism

The social position of women in capitalist society has undergone a transformation since the beginning of the century. However, the improvements that have taken place have been extremely limited – limited by the nature of the capitalist system of production which reinforces women's role as domestic workers. This is a crucial point, in contrast to the complacent reformist view that an indefinite accumulation of piecemeal reforms could slowly eradicate women's oppression.

It is becoming clear today that the position of women under capitalism is not set for any positive reforms. Working class women are fighting a battle just to try and maintain the inadequate jobs, services and living standards they have already as the ruling class attempts to make all workers pay for the crisis.

The hallowed institution of the family is cracking up through the strains of the capitalist crisis too. As the bourgeoisie sets about driving the working class into poverty and mass unemployment, divorce rates climb and families break up. The ruling class has reason to be concerned about the stability of the family and its continued functioning as a unit for

reproducing the workers it requires. That is why we see repeated appeals to public morals and domestic responsibilities. However, our stand should be different.

We are concerned about the damage inflicted on working class lives. But we do not seek to salvage a mythical golden age of family life. There is no future for the working class under capitalism, still less so for women, whose oppression is bound to increase unless we can fight to overthrow the system which enforces it.

To free women, domestic work has to be socialised, in other words, made into a public industry. The work of childcare, food preparation, laundry, etc, will be done at the expense of society. Nurses, teachers, cooks and cleaners will be workers employed by society to carry out the services required to meet people's needs. The care of the family will become the concern of society instead of the problem of the individual woman. The effect of socialising domestic work will be to destroy the social and economic reasons for the family as we know it. Once the family as an economic unit is abolished the social relations between producers, no longer dependent on exploitation and oppression, will be free.

The form that relations between people take will then be a matter of choice. And we can expect fundamental changes in the way people live their lives and spend their leisure time. Because the labour of humanity will be directly social and organised according to the political decisions of the working class, relations between people will be based on real social equality.

Chapter 3



The labour market swindle

'Studies have shown that for married women who go out to work the family and the home are still the main interests, and are regarded by themselves. . . as the prime responsibility. . . Employers accept this attitude as socially right: it should not be changed. The economic value of the mothers' work in the home cannot be calculated but the social value is unquestionable.' (CBI, *Employing women: the employer's view*, September 1967)

The employers are candid about their interest in female labour. Women can be exploited just the same as men at work; but it is their work in the home that is priceless.

In capitalist society housework is done by women, irrespective of whether they also go out to work. This was confirmed by a recent UNESCO survey of a number of major countries:

'In no country do employed men spend more than half an hour on housework, and employed women less than an hour and a half; even though women's working hours outside the home are sometimes longer than men's.'¹

Women's work in the home ensures that workers are fit for work every morning of every day of the year, year in, year out, generation after generation.

Not only does the capitalist class get the benefit of women's work in the home free of charge, it derives an additional advantage from the effect of domestic work on their position in social production. When women do get out to work they are pushed into the backwaters of the labour market. A recent survey reveals that when seeking employment, the fact that they are married and have children has serious consequences for their job prospects. Because of their different domestic commitments, the survey concludes, 'women and men do not compete on equal terms on the labour-market'.²

Women's oppression — both at home and at work — traps them in a vicious circle. The burden of domestic work prevents them from playing a full part in the productive — and the political — life of society. And their inferior position at work undermines their status in the home. Women's low wages and lack of social standing outside their own front door press them to try to compensate by working harder — cooking more excitingly, cleaning more diligently — inside it.

The types of jobs done by women have varied greatly over the years. But they have generally been segregated from men and placed in jobs which are lower paid, less secure, less skilled, less organised and more tedious.

In the nineteenth century women worked in large numbers in textiles, garment making and domestic service. As industrialisation proceeded, the proportion of women in employment rose steadily — from 13 per cent in 1800 to 25 per cent in 1851 to 30 per cent in 1911. There were clear distinctions between men's jobs and women's work, distinctions which changed little between 1841 and 1911.³ Up to the First World War most women were restricted to certain factory work, the distributive trades and domestic service; an increasing number of middle class women were taking up white collar employment.⁴

During the First World War women were drawn into the factories to cover for absent men — but after 1918 the pre-war pattern was reestablished. The growth of the consumer goods industries and the technological developments in older industries created new opportunities for women in the 'thirties. Light engineering, the electrical industry, food processing and clothing manufacture all provided more jobs for women.

Changes in the pattern and techniques of industrial production after the Second World War considerably narrowed job prospects for women. Women became confined to light unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in industries like textiles, clothing manufacture, tobacco, food and drink, light engineering and the distributive trades. While white collar jobs — notably for female teachers and nurses — expanded, the number of women manual

workers remained constant. Today women still work in 'female occupations': 45 per cent of women work in totally segregated work groups.⁵

Since the turn of the century there has been a steady rise in the proportion of married women who go out to work. The main impact of this development has not been on younger married women, who tend to start their families earlier. In 1979, 20 per cent of women with one dependent child worked full-time, 33 per cent of them part-time. Of those with two dependent children, only 13 per cent went out to work full-time and a further 40 per cent worked part-time. For all women with one or more dependent children, the participation rates were 16 per cent full-time and 36 per cent part-time.⁶ The striking change in the proportion of married women working (see Table 4, p9) has been among *older* married women. In 1931 women in the age groups 45-54 years and 55-59 years were poorly represented in the workforce (8.5 and 7.0 per cent respectively). Today, however, it has become the rule for women to return to work after raising children. In 1981 66.7 per cent of married women in the 45-54 years age group went out to work, and 51.8 per cent in the 55-59 years age group.⁷

Today the vast majority of women go out to work. A report published in 1975 showed that of the 45-55 age group, only one in a hundred had never worked for a living.⁸ Younger marriage, the decline in family size and a longer life span have all contributed to making more female labour available for capitalist exploitation. However, despite dramatic changes in the pattern of women's work, resulting largely from the decline of traditional industries and domestic service and the rise of the public service sector — the narrow range of women's job opportunities remains its most enduring characteristic:

'Most women are employed in a small number of industries and in very few occupations. Over one half of all female employees are employed in three out of 27 industrial orders — the distributive trades, professional and scientific services (including teaching and nursing) and miscellaneous services (catering, laundries, etc). In terms of occupations, the concentration is even more striking: nearly three-quarters of the female workforce come under the headings of 'clerical workers', 'service, sports and recreation workers', 'professional, technical workers and artists' and 'sales workers', while the males are much more evenly spread among these and the 20 odd other occupational orders. If attention is confined to females working part-time the same is true only more so and if a finer level of analysis is used, the same clustering of women in a small number of industrial or occupational sub-headings is found.'⁹

The inferior position of women at work is not the result of discrimination

by male employers or of the failure of women to apply for certain jobs. It is the product of the oppression of women in capitalist society. As we shall now examine in more detail, women have generally occupied the role of unskilled labourers, a section of the reserve army of the unemployed and providers of the 'second wage' – pin money for the family. The oppression of women by capital allows it to use them as a distinct group: we look also at how employers have devised particular modifications to the organisation of production to maximise the exploitation of women – homework, part-time work and job-sharing.

Unskilled labour and the family wage

Most women are unskilled workers. This lack of skills among women is the result of social development, not biology. It is true that historically, men's marginal advantage in physical strength and women's handicap as child-bearers affected the different ways in which men and women were first put to work by capitalists. Men were employed as handicraft labourers and women were left to keep the workers' home and family. However, women's absence from skilled work today has no natural cause – it is a result of social oppression.

Manufacture based on *handicraft* was the typical form of capitalist production in England from the mid sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century. It depended on the physical strength of the operative and skills acquired over a prolonged period of instruction and experience. The development of capitalist manufacture promoted a considerable degree of diversification and differentiation among craftsmen. It tended to exclude women, although many extended basic domestic tasks in the home – spinning, weaving, sewing, baking, brewing – to produce commodities for the market. However, for the most part men strove to keep women and children out of the workshops. They tried to ensure that their own wages covered the needs of the entire family.

The development of *modern industry* based on *machinery* from the late eighteenth century onwards transformed the working class. Machinery created a new hierarchy of workers, but its general tendency was to push down the value of labour-power. Whereas manufacture created a growing body of craftsmen, modern industry made old skills redundant and swelled the numbers of jobs that could be done by anybody without strength,

skill or experience. Hence, as Marx observed, the new factories opened their gates to women and children:

'In so far as machinery dispensed with muscular power, it becomes a means of employing labourers of slight muscular strength. . . . The labour of women and children was therefore, the first thing sought for by the capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family, without distinction to age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family.'¹⁰

The capitalists took advantage of their employment of several members of a family and cut down the wage they had previously paid to its male head to cover the needs, not only of himself, but also of his wife and children:

'Machinery, by throwing every member of the family on to the labour market, spreads the value of the man's labour-power over his whole family. It thus depreciates his labour-power. . . . Thus we see, that machinery, while augmenting the human material that forms the principal object of capital's exploiting power, at the same time raises the degree of exploitation.'¹¹

The booming cotton and woollen industries in Lancashire and Yorkshire drew in large numbers of women and children. The Factory Acts of the 1820s and 1830s restricted the employment of children, but by 1838 more than three-quarters of British textile workers were women. The women worked and minded, cleaned and serviced the machines. Because their labour was unskilled, they could be instantly replaced – either in short-term lay-offs or permanently.

Since the nineteenth century the nature of women's work has changed, but lack of skill is a remarkably constant feature. Indeed, the steady advance of technological innovation in industry since the First World War has resulted in women's jobs becoming increasingly unskilled.¹² 'New' technology (microchips, etc) has simply accelerated this process.¹³ Word processors, for example, have reduced the skills needed for typing. 'New' technology has had the same old effect of destroying traditional working techniques and trade union organisation based upon them. For example, computerised typesetting has undermined the strength of the print unions in Fleet Street: skilled work once done by men can now be done by unskilled women. At the same time 'new' technology also threatens to remove thousands of women's jobs. One authority estimates that 170 000 women's office jobs will vanish by 1990. Ironically, the new jobs that will

be created will tend to be skilled 'and at present more men than women have the required skills'.¹⁴ A similar process has already taken place on a smaller scale in the London clearing banks: between 1974 and 1976 there was a drop of four per cent in female employment – jobs for men rose by 2.4 per cent.¹⁵

The following table shows that the spheres of employment in which women predominate are the ones in which technological innovation may be expected to hit jobs hardest.

Table 5 Employment distribution by sex, 1971	Male	Female
	100.0	100.0
Professional and technical*	10.8	11.7
Administrative and managerial	5.3	0.8
Clerical workers*	11.2	29.5
Sales workers*	7.4	11.6
Service workers	5.7	22.3
Agricultural	4.0	1.1
Production workers	52.3	18.7
Not classified (generally unemployed, never worked)	1.8	4.1
Others (armed forces)	1.5	0.1

* Occupations most open to rationalisation through the introduction of new technology

Source: *EOC Research Bulletin*, Vol 1, No 3, Spring 1980, Table 5.9

In a clear message to employers in 1978 the Government advised even small businessmen to economise: 'The total cost of a small computer system is now less than the cost of employing a clerk'.¹⁶

Capital's condemnation of women to play the role of a pool of cheap unskilled labour has called forth a series of misdirected responses from early trade unionists and socialists, and from modern feminists.

In the late nineteenth century the early labour movement made repeated attempts to get women out of the factories. There were two aspects to this approach. Some trade unionists reacted to women out of competitive sectional prejudices. They blamed women (not the capitalists) for under-cutting wage rates and taking men's jobs. On the other hand some socialists took a protective, paternalistic view. They responded to the dangerous and degrading character of factory work by demanding that women should return to the home. A socialist newspaper in 1893 called for wives to stay at home and look after the children.¹⁷

Both responses were reactionary. The trade unionists fell for the divisive strategy of the employers. Putting narrow sectional concerns before the concerns of the working class as a whole, they betrayed both women and their own true interests as workers in uniting across sexual divisions against capital. The early socialists underestimated the positive potential of women being drawn into social production. Women's work in factories may have been onerous — but it was at least a release from the stultifying isolation of work in the home. Engels argued rightly that 'the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industries'.¹⁸

Today the women's movement echoes these prejudices and compounds them with its own confusions on the issue of the 'family wage'. Jane Humphries, for example, calls for the removal of women from wage labour as part of a drive to raise the 'family wage' paid to men:

'The withdrawal of certain members of the working class from the labour market in conjunction with a campaign for a "family wage" could, by raising the real wages of the remaining workers, improve the working class standard of living.'¹⁹

Humphries implicitly accepts that women are to blame for the reduction in the 'family wage'. But her approach to raising men's wages is impracticable. It contradicts the progressive drive by capital to integrate the entire working class into social production. The only effective way to boost the income of the family is to fight for equal pay for women. The 'family wage' is an ideal which has scarcely ever become reality.²⁰ Some skilled workers may have been able to confine their wives to perpetual housework but the tendency has always been for capital to pull women out to work even if only for part of their working lives. This has become the norm for the simple reason that male wages have generally been insufficient to keep a family.²¹ In Britain today, on average, women's earnings make up 25 per cent of the family income; one third contribute between 33 and 50 per cent.²² Without women at work most modern families simply could not survive.²³

The recognition that whatever women do is classed as unskilled has led some feminists to the conclusion that women's qualities are 'undervalued'.²⁴ The EOC recently criticised job evaluation schemes on the grounds that they 'persistently disregard or undervalue the characteristics of women's work, such as the dexterity, precision or, on the negative side, monotony, repetitiveness and the need for sustained attention'.²⁵ Many feminists consider that because the work women perform in the home is valueless, then they are cheated of the full value of their labour-power

when they go out to work. Pursuing the same theme further, some feminists demand 'wages for housework' because they feel that women are being cheated at home as well as at work.

These definitions of women's low status as workers all assume that things could be different under capitalism if only women's 'skills' and special contribution to society were recognised. But this is not a moral question: women become unskilled workers because that is what capital needs. Their work may be difficult and arduous. As far as capital is concerned attributes like dexterity, perseverance and reliability are useful qualities to have in the workforce. But these skills do not need to be acquired through training; therefore they do not enter into the determination of the value of women's labour power. Rather than endowing women's work with a false sense of worth we need to argue that women must have access to all skills to play a full role in social life.

Women as reserve army

'Women have demonstrated their versatility and ability in a wide range of jobs, particularly during the war years, but little appears to have been achieved in removing the attitude that women workers are, in a sense, 'temporary workers'.' (CBI, *Employing women: the employers' view*, September 1967, p14)

British employers have of course done much to ensure that this particular 'attitude' which their representative organisation the CBI disingenuously bemoans, remains firmly entrenched.

The capitalist system requires a reserve of unemployed workers and women have always been a major part of its number.²⁶ As capital has expanded it has drawn in workers from the countryside, from overseas, and always from the pool of underemployed women in the home.²⁷ In times of recession such workers are among the first to return to unemployment.

Women joined the labour force in large numbers in the post-war boom. Between 1951 and 1971 the net expansion of the working population was 2.5 million – of which number 2.2 million were women. In his report on industrial relations in 1968, Lord Donovan criticised employers for not training more women, commenting that 'women provide the only substantial new source from which extra labour and especially skilled labour can be drawn in this period'.²⁸

The fact that women remained largely unskilled, poorly organised and

widely regarded by employers and unions alike as 'temporary workers' meant that when the recession came, there was little resistance to women being shunted back into the home. All the problems of unemployment – loss of self-esteem, boredom, etc – are considered much less significant for women – they always have the housework to be getting on with. There are however two important factors that counteract the general trend for capitalists to dispose of their newly acquired female workers in the current climate of crisis. First, women are cheaper to employ than men, and second, they tend to work in segregated occupational spheres.

At the beginning of 1982 the average gross wage for men was £140, for women £91. This is the main reason why employers employ women – and are reluctant to let them go. Unilever's personnel manager Miss A M Mackie summed up the matter succinctly:

'The main reasons for employing women were fourfold: a) there were not enough men; b) women were cheaper, and this was still a valid argument; c) they were more suitable for seasonal or temporary employment; and d) women had greater skills for certain jobs, usually those requiring a certain dexterity.'²⁹

Women are congregated in a limited number of jobs in specific sectors of the economy. In the past, restructuring in the textile and light engineering trades led to large-scale female unemployment. However, in the post-war period women's employment has increased most markedly in the public service sector. Here there is little competition between men and women for jobs and women's employment is relatively highly unionised and secure. Indeed, the public sector was spared the vigorous shakeout that hit the private sector in the early years of the recession – although the threat of massive redundancies in the civil service and NHS now looms.³⁰

The general trend of women's unemployment is unmistakably upwards – although this is masked by official statistics which disregard married women's unemployment.³¹ The aggregate of registered and unregistered unemployment reveals that women are much more dispensable than men in the recession.³² The temporary woman worker is not just more dispensable in periods of recession – she is also more vulnerable to the dictates of capital when she is at work. Many women, reflecting the views of management and unions, are grateful they have a job. Mindful of the lengthening dole queues, women workers are less likely to complain about inferior wage rates and poor conditions.

Capital benefits greatly from women's position on the fringes of the labour market, always available to be pulled into factories or pushed out

again, as the state of the economy demands. Employers use unemployed women as a threat to male workers, to keep them in line and their wages down. The position of women among the unemployed has always been exploited to reduce living standards all round:

'The temporary or local want of labour brings about *no rise in wages*, but a forcing of women and children into the fields, and exploitation of the women and children takes place on a larger scale, it becomes in turn a new means of making a surplus population of the male agricultural labourer and keeping down his wages.'³³

The hidden army

Many women work in jobs which place them in an intermediate position between housewife and full-time wage labourer — as homeworkers, part-time workers or job-sharers.

Homeworkers

In the early days of capitalist production merchants distributed raw materials around to workers' homes where they were made up by the family into commodities which were then collected for the market by the merchant. This primitive method of organising production has persisted in a few marginal sectors where capitalists attempt to compensate for low productivity by intensifying the exploitation of labour in the home.³⁴

Homework has much in common with domestic work. It is largely performed by women on their own, in their own homes.³⁵ The work is usually unskilled, repetitive and boring. Any skills that are required are the traditional female domestic skills of sewing, knitting, etc. There is no supervisor or foreman to enforce the long hours and strict discipline necessary to make homeworking pay — the woman is her own taskmaster. However, although homework is privatised like domestic work, it produces commodities for exchange, which ordinary housework does not. Homeworking is part of social production and women's labour-power is exchanged for a wage.

Homeworking is a very backward form of social production. The workers generally have heavy domestic commitments and receive very low wages.³⁶ There are no reliable figures on the number of homeworkers, but estimates vary between 200 000 and 400 000.³⁷ There are few legal barriers to the exploitation of women in this sector. Homeworking costs

employers nothing in national insurance contributions, sick pay, holiday pay, pension and maternity benefits, little in wages and less in overheads (they save on rent, rates, heat, light and power). The great advantage of homeworking for capitalists is its total flexibility. They can compensate for any fluctuation in demand by taking on or laying off homeworkers at no cost to themselves. The homeworker knows she lacks bargaining power — she cannot very well go on strike and combination with other homeworkers is virtually impossible:

'Sometimes I put in 50 or 60 hours. . . I've stayed up till 4am. I'm sewing most of the day, nearly every day of the week. . . I can't ask for less or he'd have to employ someone else.' (a woman with one child who sews knitted garments together for 40p an hour)³⁸

Many homeworkers are grateful to their employers for giving them at least something for their labouring time which under normal conditions (as a housewife) is valueless, regardless of the time and energy expended:

'Gratitude for the income, however small, often outweighed any inclination to carp at the rate it is earned. . . Lower earnings were considered the price to be paid for the convenience of working at home.'³⁹

The labour movement has long neglected homeworkers. The unions have often seen certain homeworkers as a threat to factory and office workers because they do the same job at cheaper rates. Employers can easily play off one section against the other. The problem is that homeworking only survives because of the super-exploitation it entails. If employers were forced to pay union rates homeworking would be abolished. In the absence of any alternative employment and preconditions for going out to work (such as nurseries and decent geriatric care), many homeworkers are obviously opposed to trade unionism and its inevitable consequences.⁴⁰

Part-time workers

Part-time work can only be carried out by a minority of the working class: if it became general it would mean a reduction in the working day all round. This would reduce the time available for the exploitation of the working class, and, if the capitalists continued to pay wages equivalent to the value of labour-power, curtail the appropriation of surplus value. Thus part-time work is only done by a certain section of workers in exchange for wages that are too low to sustain all their needs. Part-time workers have to be subsidised by full-time workers.

Most part-time workers are women, dependent for the rest of their income on men or the state (social security), and spending the rest of their time working in the home. In the EEC countries less than 10 per cent of all workers are employed part-time, but a quarter of all working women are part-timers. In Britain only 2 per cent of men work part-time, but more than 40 per cent of working women do.⁴¹ Part-time workers typically have heavier domestic commitments: 83 per cent are married, compared with only 52 per cent of women full-timers.

The employment of part-time workers carries certain disadvantages for the capitalist class.⁴² Production generally runs more smoothly when there are fewer transfers among different workers. And more part-timers means more paperwork and other personnel overheads and headaches. However, the capitalists would rather employ some women part-time than pay out for the sort of childcare and other social services which would enable all women to work full-time. They make sure that they get value for money from their part-time workers: many do the equivalent of a day's work for half a day's pay.⁴³ Many get no breaks and most get no holiday. Because they fall below the National Insurance threshold employers are spared this incursion on their profits and the workers get no sick pay or unemployment benefit.

Since the onset of the recession the number of women in part-time work has increased, while the number in full-time employment has stagnated. The proportion of part-timers rose steadily until 1981, as the following table shows.

Table 6 Female employees in employment, full and part-time (in 000s), Great Britain

Year	Full-time	Part-time	Total	% Part-time
1971	5468	2757	8225	34
1972	5454	2877	8331	35
1973	5542	3163	8705	36
1974	5512	3421	8933	38
1975	5422	3551	8973	40
1976	5366	3585	8951	40
1977	5433	3617	9050	40
1978	5478	3679	9157	40
1979	5560	3781	9341	41
1980	5768	3680	9048	41
1981	5167	3496	8663	40

Source: *Department of Employment Gazette*, May 1974, June 1975, July 1976 November 1977, February 1981, April 1981, January 1982, all Table 1

What this table does not reveal is that approximately 130 000 part-time jobs were created every year from 1951 to 1979. The net increase of more than one and a half million part-time jobs since the mid 'sixties has accompanied a net decline of more than two million full-time jobs during the same period. There are several reasons for the dramatic expansion of part-time work.

First, employers in sectors such as catering and retail distribution faced a shortage of labour at the same time that they were under pressure to cut costs and raise productivity. They required workers who were prepared to tolerate unsocial hours — evenings, weekends, holidays — for low pay in poor conditions. One solution was to recruit part-time women instead of full-time men. This was a welcome alternative to raising wages to attract men as one investigation noted:

'Rather than raise the wages of full-timers, employers sought to fill their labour needs with part-time women workers. The attraction of this policy was that part-timers could be used to cover peak periods of business only, without the need to pay them for a full week's work. By this method labour costs could be effectively reduced.'⁴⁴

Despite the difficulties of organising childcare, there were plenty of women looking for a way of supplementing their often declining family income by taking on part-time work of this sort for low pay. The hourly rate for part-time women is between 80 and 82 per cent of that of full-time women, between 58 and 66 per cent of full-time men's.

The second factor which contributed to the expansion of part-time work was the law. To avoid paying the equivalent of the men's rate to women under the 1970 Equal Pay Act, employers either replaced full-time men by part-time women or turned full-time women into part-timers. Most of this sort of reorganisation of workforces took place before the EPA was finally implemented in 1975. The subsequent operation of the Act has reinforced the inferior position of part-timers. Where part-time workers have claimed the same rate for the job as men who do the same work full time, judges have ruled that the shorter hours constitute a material difference which excludes such claims for parity. The case of *Jenkins vs Kingsgate Clothing*, which went to the European Court on appeal, produced the ruling that part-time women can be paid at lower rates than full-time men doing identical work if the difference 'can be accounted for by objective economic reasons'.⁴⁵

The law restricts the rights of part-timers in other ways. They are generally excluded from the guarantees against unfair and summary dismissal under the 1975 Employment Protection Act — they do not usually

qualify under the length of service and hours worked conditions.⁴⁶

In short, part-time workers don't count as normal employees — they suffer systematic discrimination in every aspect of their employment. When Nicki Fonda from Brunel University was researching at a company, she asked how many people they employed. They told her 300 people. 'Then I said, "How many part-time people do you have?"'. They replied, "Oh well, we've another 250 women doing that"'. Nor are part-timers 'counted' by the state. They cannot register as unemployed because they are not 'available for full-time work'. And because nearly 80 per cent of part-timers are married they cannot claim supplementary benefit either.

The unions are oblivious to part-timers and their specific problems. As late as 1969 the union of Post Office workers decided not to allow any more part-timers to join the union. Those that do inevitably have little time for union affairs and meetings because they have little enough time to do wage labour, never mind union work. The current attack on the right to do union work and hold meetings in work time, for example in the 1982 NHS dispute and in the civil service, further restricts the opportunity for part-timers to participate.⁴⁷ And trade union organisation is made more difficult by the near total segregation of part-timers into women's work: 'between 91 and 96 per cent of part-time female employees work in the same industries and companies as full-time female workers'.⁴⁸

Job-sharing

'Job-sharing' is part-time work for younger middle class women who want to combine motherhood with 'a career': a job formerly done by one person full-time is 'shared' between two part-time workers, part-time housewives. Pressure for job-sharing has come from feminists and unions with a substantial membership among middle class women. Employers have accepted job-sharing because it makes white collar and professional women more productive and allows them to retain their skilled female staff without having to provide childcare facilities. An EOC survey revealed that almost three-quarters of all sharers were less than 40, nearly half in their thirties. Most — 84 per cent — had A-levels; 95 per cent some higher education.⁴⁹ None earned less than £4000 a year, more than half earned between £4000 and £6000 and a third between £6000 and £8000.

Like short-time working, job-sharing is only accepted by employers if it can be used to raise productivity. As the CBI puts it: 'the total cost of any change must be offset by savings elsewhere'.⁵⁰ The authors elaborate with a series of questions for managers to ponder when confronted with demands for the introduction of job-sharing:

'What are your objectives when contemplating change? Are you merely responding to pressure? Are you taking every opportunity to introduce changes that you need? . . . How could you reduce/offset the cost of a shorter working time? . . . By extending plant capacity eg by introducing or extending shift working? By greater control of absenteeism? . . . By eliminating restrictive practices? By greater flexibility of labour? By eliminating unnecessary overtime? . . . By adjusting production speeds? By offsetting any residual cost in a subsequent pay settlement.'⁵¹

Sue Stevens shares a job with Jill Dodwell-Groves at Camden Council. She explains how her employers benefit: 'If one person goes sick, they've still got the other person, so at least half the job is being done, and the same goes for holidays. Another plus for the employer is that time off to go to the doctor or the dentist, and the little distractions which take your mind off work — you do them on your days off'.⁵²

and the shoe

**LAW-ABIDING
WOMEN
SUFFRAGISTS**



Chapter 4

Women and the state

Many supporters of women's rights have looked to the state as an instrument for social reform. At first sight there appears to be a strong argument for this strategy. Women have often benefited from the steady advance of state intervention in the capitalist economy. Child benefits, maternity benefits, sick pay, unemployment benefits and pensions have been made available to women. Female workers have been the beneficiaries — as consumers and workers — of the expansion of health, education, housing and social service provision. And women have been granted a degree of protection under the law, from the Factory Acts of the nineteenth century to the more recent abortion and employment legislation.

However, when we examine the question in detail the limited and formal character of state reforms becomes clear. In this section we examine state intervention in spheres — childcare, maternity benefits, protective legislation, equal pay and abortion — that directly affect women. In all these aspects we find that the gains for women are partial and entirely circumscribed by the demands of the capitalist economy.

In reality the state cannot rise above the laws of the capitalist system. And as long as capitalism exists, the oppression of women based on domestic work will continue. The state enforces the laws of capital and ensures that women continue to play their role as domestic workers. When times are prosperous the state can be forced to grant limited reforms. But

these reforms are qualified by the needs of capital and at the first sign of an economic crisis are immediately withdrawn.

The present recession has seen the ruthless assertion of capitalist interests over the needs of women. Women are now discovering that they have no right to council housing — they must become pregnant (unintentionally homeless), suffer a nervous breakdown or get pneumonia from rising damp before they qualify. Women have no right to place their children in local authority nurseries — it is up to women to prove somehow that they are inadequate as mothers. Women have no right to abortion: the matter is decided between doctors and the availability of hospital facilities.

The state that once promised welfare for all now provides means-tested benefits for a few and encourages the rest to look after themselves. 'Don't call the doctor' advise notices in surgery waiting rooms — make do with Benylin, aspirin and a first-aid kit. Old people are refused a place in an old people's home if they have a daughter out of work. As home-helps, meals-on-wheels and district nurses are cut back, ageing wives and dutiful daughters carry the burden free of charge. Unemployed women can now mind their own children and try to teach them what they might learn if they had the privilege of going to nursery school.

Childcare

Some of women's household chores can be reduced by modern technology or squeezed into non-working hours; young children, however, need constant attention. It is impossible to get infants to look after themselves; indeed, it is illegal to leave them unattended all day. If a mother wants to go out to work she has to find somebody to mind the baby. A chronic shortage of nursery facilities is a general feature of capitalist society and a key aspect of its oppression of women. It pushes the burden of childcare onto the mother. It forces working women with young children to rely on the support of other women, private entrepreneurs or the state, usually at considerable cost and inconvenience.

Employers have manoeuvred skilfully to maximise their exploitation of female labour while minimising their expenditure on childcare. Their most important device is part-time work: in Britain in 1978 750 000 women with children under five worked, more than two-thirds as part-timers.¹ By allowing women to work a twilight shift, or during school hours only and releasing them for the summer holidays, capitalists get the best of both worlds. They get cheap female labour — and childcare costs

them nothing. It is either carried out unpaid by the mother when she is not working, or paid for as a deduction from her wages when she is. The level and character of available childcare has varied considerably over the present century, according to the particular needs of the capitalist economy. One remarkably constant feature is the failure of the state to provide a comprehensive nursery service of a high standard to free young mothers to play a full role at work. If anything things have got worse. In 1900 43 per cent of children aged three and four attended state-aided elementary schools.² Eighty years later only 11 per cent of under-fives were receiving either nursery education or day-care. Yet over roughly the same period (1911-1981) married women's economic activity rates increased from 9.6 per cent to 48.8 per cent.³ Important variations in nursery provision have, however, taken place – most significantly in times of war in response to the increased demand for female labour in the factories.

The First World War provided a major stimulus to the expansion of nurseries. In the immediate pre-war period day nurseries began to increase in number as formal schooling for very young children declined. By 1919 174 state-run day nurseries were in operation, largely to look after the children of women working in the munitions factories. After the war, however, women were pushed out of the factories and nursery provision stagnated. By 1938 there were 118 nursery schools and 104 day nurseries.

The Second World War brought many more women into waged work, and many more children into nurseries. In 1941 there were 194 nurseries in England and Wales; three years later there were 1450 catering for 68 181 children full time and a further 109 looking after 3625 children part time. There were in addition 35 000 children in nursery schools and another 103 000 children in reception classes in elementary schools.⁴ The nurseries were open between 12 and 15 hours a day; mothers were still expected to fulfil their maternal duties after their very long days in the factories.

Again, when the war was over women were drafted back to their station in the kitchen. Government ideologues discovered that children needed their mothers; nurseries were for special cases:

'The proper place for a child under two is at home with its mother. . . under normal peacetime conditions, the right policy to pursue would be to positively discourage mothers of children under two from going out to work. . . to regard day nurseries and daily guardians as supplements to meet the special needs. . . of children whose mothers are constrained by individual circumstances to go out to work or whose home conditions are in themselves unsatisfactory from the health point of view, or whose mothers are incapable for some good reason

of undertaking the full care of their children.⁵

After the war nursery provision declined: 400 day nurseries were closed between 1945 and 1947. Although the number of nurseries increased in the same period (from 75 to 353), the total number of children in nursery care dropped. Nursery education was a more limited service; it covered a shorter day and school terms only — mothers could work only restricted hours or make special arrangements. And nursery schools only took children from the age of three; day nurseries from birth.

Nursery provision stagnated through the 'fifties and early 'sixties: in 1966 only 8.8 per cent of under-fives had any access to nursery care.⁶ The limited number of nursery places made available through local authorities was virtually restricted to the children of single parents ('unmarried mothers' as they were called), the totally impoverished or psychiatrically disturbed.⁷ Exceptions were made in response to particular needs of the labour market in the late 'sixties. Shortages of teachers and nurses led to the expansion of nursery provision for the children of these workers so that they could return from their housework to schools and hospitals. As more and more women were drawn back to work in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies the provision of nursery facilities slowly increased.⁸ This trend has been reversed since the onset of the recession and the increase in women's unemployment and part-time work.⁹

The current alternatives to state nurseries are generally expensive and unsatisfactory. Playgroups are only open for a small part of the working day and they invariably involve parents in running them, which is usually impracticable for full-time working parents. Yet playgroups have a larger share of the pre-school market than nurseries — 18 per cent compared to 11 per cent.

Few employers provide nursery facilities: in 1974 there were only 81 workplace nurseries in Britain and a further 59 provided by colleges for staff and students. Such nurseries' hours are precisely fixed according to the employers' needs and they usually involve substantial cost to the worker. One survey in 1978 noted that employers providing nursery facilities 'reported difficulties staying within financial guidelines and more importantly, they frequently mentioned financial pressure on the quality of childcare'.¹⁰ The recession has resulted in nursery closures, higher charges and deteriorating facilities.

Private nurseries are very expensive: the 1978 survey estimated average costs of around £20 a week — at a time when average women's wages were scarcely twice that figure.¹¹ Yet as the table shows private nurseries have mushroomed as state provision has stagnated. The other

growth area is child-minding. The figures in the table record only the number of children with *registered* minders – the real figure is probably twice as high.

Table 7 Day nurseries, private nurseries and child-minders in England and Wales (places in 000s)

Year	Local Authority Nurseries	Private Nurseries	Child-Minders
1948	41	—	—
1953	35	11	5
1958	24	13	9
1963	22	31	21
1968	21	146	47
1973	24	335	92
1978	28	414	100

Source: Tizard et al, *op cit*, Table 4; *Social Trends*, HMSO, 1981, Table 3.4

One consistent feature of public controversy around childcare is the way in which government officials and other experts produce elaborate justifications for whatever type of care is most suited to the requirements of the capitalist system at any particular time. We have seen how they rationalised the post-war decline in provision by claiming that it was in the best interests of babies to be in the constant company of their mothers. After a spell of unpopularity in the 'sixties when encouraging married women back to work was the order of the day, the same old theories re-emerged in the 'seventies, when women's labour was less in demand. The Plowden Committee 'deplored the increasing tendency of mothers of young children to work'.¹² A 1974 DHSS document emphasised that 'a strong theme to emerge from consultations was that mothers of young children in particular should be encouraged to stay at home'.¹³ By 1976, when the government was promoting child-minding as a do-it-yourself alternative to state nurseries, DHSS principal social work officer Pamela Thayer extolled the virtues of 'the day foster mother':

'The individual care offered by the day foster mother may be the most positive form of care to the child who needs day-long care outside his own family. . . . Most obviously the child can grow up in the security of a familiar environment which resembles his own home (providing an opportunity) for the child to make the close personal continuing relationships that are so essential to the foundation of sound emotional development'.¹⁴

Few mothers forced to rely on child-minding would share this opinion. Margaret Bone found that only three per cent of parents with under-fives expressed a preference for child-minders:

'Child-minders were selected by about the same number of children as were actually using them, but most of the votes related to children who were currently non-users of day provision. For the great majority of the children who were with child-minders, other forms of provision would have been preferred.'¹⁵

As Robin Simpson comments:

'The recent interest in child-minding has been based on the fallacy that it is cheap and popular. It is cheap to only one of four interested parties – the government. To the other three – parent, minder and child – it is expensive.'¹⁶

Radical critics of state nursery policies have tried to persuade the government that its savings on childcare are a false economy and that more nurseries would be a sound investment:

'A thorough-going costing would for instance have to take into full account the current cost of the NHS of treating those depressive illnesses which arise from the isolation of women in the home. Furthermore, there are many women with valuable skills who are unable to use them because a lack of childcare facilities prevents them from working; here again is a significant cost to the economy which an improvement of childcare provision would reduce.'¹⁷

As long as the capitalist class can get childcare carried out free of charge by women in the home, it makes very good sense – from its point of view – to restrict spending on nurseries to what is strictly necessary for the immediate needs of the economy. Capitalists will only spend money for nurseries in two circumstances – when their factories and offices require more female labour or when the working class forces it out of them in its struggle to free women from the tyranny of exclusive responsibility for childcare in the home.

Maternity rights and benefits

Women's role as child-bearers has won increasing recognition from the state. The ruling class has conceded certain rights to pregnant women and even provides benefits to ensure minimal standards of care for the new generation of workers. However, the state makes sure that the burden of

child-birth falls heavily on the working class in general and women in particular.

Employers treat all women of reproductive age as potential child-bearers.¹⁸ They resent putting in time and resources into training and paying higher wages to women who may suddenly begin to swell at the waistline and then walk out the door. Thus women pay for their reproductive capacities even before they become pregnant. They pay even more afterwards, as having a baby under capitalism almost invariably means a drop in living standards. The massive increase in family expenditure necessitated by a new baby is only partially offset by tax concessions and benefits. The bosses get new workers on the cheap through workers' preparedness to make sacrifices to have children.

However, women have won certain rights and benefits that provide some compensation for the economic burden of having a baby. Let's look at them in more detail.

Women now have a legal right to return to their job after having a baby. This is a modern innovation. Until 1977, when the Employment Protection Act came into effect, women had no such job security — in fact pregnancy was regarded as a legitimate pretext for dismissal. Indeed, until the end of the Second World War mere marriage was sufficient to prompt instant dismissal from the civil service: there were calls to re-impose 'the marriage bar' throughout the 'fifties. It is still widely assumed that women have neither the inclination nor the capacity to return to work until their children start at school. In practical terms the inadequacy of nursery provisions makes this a realistic assumption. However, it is also endorsed by the promotion of 'scientific' childcare theories which insist that the well-being of the child, family and nation depends on mother staying at home with the baby. All these factors restrict in practice the operation of women's legal right to return to work.

However, over the last few years the legal right itself has been further restricted. Until 1980 a woman had only to work for her boss for six months before she was entitled to demand her job back after having a baby. Now this period has been extended to a year. If the firm employs 20 or fewer workers, then a woman can be sacked until she has worked there for two years. The 1980 Employment Act has introduced the perfect let-out clause for the employer. He has only to show that he acted reasonably in dismissing a pregnant woman, 'in the circumstances (including the size and administrative resources) of his undertaking'.¹⁹ In addition, the woman now has to claim her rights, in writing, three times, to cover herself — and yet the boss can still refuse to re-employ in certain circumstances. The boss can claim that it is not 'reasonably practicable' to give the

woman her own job back, and can offer another which is 'not substantially less favourable'. If she refuses 'unreasonably', she loses her right to re-statement.²⁰

The limited rights gained in the late 'seventies are already disappearing fast in the early 'eighties. Between 1979 and 1980 the proportion of women returning to work by the time their babies were eight months old had risen from 15 to 24 per cent of all working mothers.²¹ Today it is certainly in decline again. Employers, particularly the small businessmen dear to the Tory Government, have campaigned stridently against the restrictions on their rights to hire and fire at will. They are also on the war-path against the range of meagre benefits available to mothers at the expense of the capitalist class.

The maternity *grant* was first introduced in 1911 as part of a package of welfare measures in response to government concern about the 'fitness of the nation' for intensifying economic – and military – competition. Today all mothers get £25 when they have a baby. The sum has not increased since 1969 and today will barely purchase a couple of baby suits and a couple of dozen disposable nappies.

The maternity *allowance* came in as part of the reorganisation of welfare services after the Second World War. The birthrate was rising and the government wanted to make sure that the baby boom contributed to Britain's anticipated economic boom. The allowance is now paid from eleven weeks before birth until seven weeks after, at a rate of less than £25 a week. It is only available to women who have themselves worked and made the requisite National Insurance contributions.

Maternity *pay* was the concession of the last Labour Government to the pressure of unions representing large numbers of female white collar workers. It is available only to full-time workers who have worked for the same employer for two years or more, or part-time workers who have worked for the same boss for five years. This condition automatically disqualifies large numbers of women, particularly at a time when redundancy and periods of unemployment are inescapable for many working class women.²² Maternity pay is paid at a rate of 90 per cent of basic wages – but only for *six weeks*. It is also taxed and deducted from maternity allowance.

Now even these miserable benefits are under attack. In October 1980 the Government investigated the possibility of 'rationalising' the complex maternity grant-pay-benefit into a single, simplified system. It was suggested that all the cash benefits might be combined into one lump sum of £140. As a result 370 000 women would gain approximately £115 each, while 390 000 would lose between £110 and £480.²³ In addition the

Government was confident that 400 civil servants presently engaged in administering the schemes could be shown the door, as a result of the 'simplification'.²⁴ The scheme involved nothing more than a redistribution of existing resources, and favoured unemployed mothers at the expense of working women. Its object was summed up succinctly by the chairman of NALGO's Equal Opportunities Committee: 'the proposal to replace maternity pay with a simple lump-sum maternity grant is a clear indication that the Government believes a woman's place is in the home'.²⁵ After a storm of opposition this scheme was finally dropped. As the Government squeezes spending on welfare further we can expect a renewed onslaught on maternity benefits.

Protective legislation

For more than a century the government has interfered in the free operation of the capitalist economy with laws designed to protect women from its worst effects. Such protective legislation has always been controversial, both within the labour movement and among feminists.

In the nineteenth century the state, fearing the total exhaustion of the working class as a result of the ruthless depredations of capital, stepped in to curb the worst excesses of the factory system. Acting in the interests of capital in general, Parliament passed a series of laws restricting the tendency of employers to extend the working day towards 24 hours and to pull all women and the youngest of children into their factories.

However, the capitalist state put little effort and scant resources into measures to curb the exploitation of the working class. It was not until workers themselves organised together and put pressure on the state that protective legislation was enforced. Factory workers first promoted a Ten Hours Bill in 1838; the struggle for an eight-hour day was at the centre of labour movement politics around the turn of the century. The earliest factory legislation merely prohibited the use of child labour; it was not until 1844 that limited protections were extended to women.

There were two distinct views in the labour movement on protective legislation for women. There was the reactionary outlook of narrow-minded trade unionists who welcomed state restrictions on women's employment because they reduced competition on the labour market. In contrast, progressive socialists welcomed restrictions on the length of the working day and measures which prevented the gross extremes of exploitation of female labour. In their view the Factory Acts created

more favourable conditions for organising the working class against capital. Thus Marx welcomed working class agitation around the Factory Acts:

'For "protection" against "the serpent of their agonies" the labourers must put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death.'²⁶

Marx noted that improvements in the working conditions of women resulting from the Factory Acts soon generally extended to cover the whole working class:

'One of their first consequences was that in practice the working day of the adult males in factories became subject to the same limitations, since in most processes of production the co-operation of children, young persons, and women is indispensable.'²⁷

Working class women did not object to the restrictions on excessive hours, night work and certain kinds of labour. As one factory inspector commented: 'no instances have come to my knowledge of adult women having expressed any regret at their *rights* being interfered with'.²⁸ Bourgeois feminists, however, in their opposition to protective legislation, championed the abstract rights of women to be freely exploited. In the 1870s Emma Paterson denounced trade unionists for supporting a Bill which sought to extend certain protections to women and children:

'This Bill is intended to apply also to children, with whom women are classed, thus conveying and endeavouring to perpetuate the idea that women are entirely unable to protect themselves, a position, to a certain extent, degraded and injurious... The result may be the reduction of wages, already often insufficient, and sometimes complete exclusion from work, thus becoming, in place of protection, a real and grievous oppression.'²⁹

Again in the 'twenties a number of former suffragettes and Tory women formed the 'Open Door Council' 'to secure that a woman shall be free to work and protected as a worker on the same terms as men and that legislation and regulations dealing with conditions and hours, payment, entry and training shall be based on the nature of the work and not on the sex of the work... irrespective of marriage and childbirth'.³⁰ What these seemingly radical proposals amounted to was a call for women to be allowed to work in the mines, through the night, to go back to work

immediately after childbirth, to lift heavy weights and to work with poisonous white lead. In calling for women to be allowed to do work that was damaging to the health of male workers, these middle class women backed the employers against the working class.

It was true that some trade unionists supported restrictions on women's hours to defend men's jobs. And it was also true that some women lost their jobs as a result of protective legislation, and that it served to a degree to reinforce the segregation of the labour market. But the way to deal with these problems was to carry on the offensive and extend the legislation to cover *all* workers. Retreating to the previous state of affairs under the bourgeois slogan of 'a woman's right to be super-exploited' has never been a strategy with much appeal for working class women. In Russia, Lenin advocated pushing the struggle forward through calling for the abolition of all overtime and all but essential nightwork, and for the exclusion of women from industries dangerous to their health.³¹

Today, women's working hours and their handling of toxic substances and heavy weights are all restricted by law. Like many of the limited gains the working class has won from the capitalists, protective legislation for women is now threatened. The British employers' organisation the CBI some time ago invoked the concept of 'equality' to justify its determination to remove the barriers to the more equal exploitation of women:

'Among other factors militating against equality is the long tradition by which women still have certain privileges and specific legislative protection. True equality must be dependent on the abandonment of outdated concepts and practices.'³²

This view was endorsed by the Labour Government's left-wing employment minister Barbara Castle:

'There is a long history to legal restriction on the hours that women and people may work in factories. But the appalling social and industrial conditions which produced them are happily a thing of the past. Is there, then, any longer a need for these restrictions? And if not, to what extent are they standing in the way of higher productivity and greater industrial efficiency?'³³

In the event the recession made the legal curbs on women's exploitation less of a problem for the capitalist class. There were other ways in which they could ensure the maximum use of female labour, so they left the legislation intact.

Equal pay

Since 1975 the law in Britain has granted women equal pay and protection against discrimination in employment. Why did the government introduce the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts, and what difference have they made to women's position in society?³⁴

Pressure from two sources – one at home, the other abroad – pushed the British state into legislation on women's rights. During the 'sixties there was a series of important strikes in which women workers sought to improve their rates of pay by demanding parity with their male work-mates. The blatant discrimination of lower women's rates for jobs shared with men provoked spontaneous outbursts of militant action for equal pay.³⁵ The 1968 machinists' strike at Ford's Dagenham plant threatened a wave of similar disputes to win equal pay through uncontrolled collective bargaining. The trade union leaders could no longer ignore this threat to the stability of industrial relations, nor could the government. Their interests converged on the need for legislation which would outlaw discriminatory practices and allow order to be restored in the factories.

At the same time the British ruling class came under pressure from its partners in the EEC, of which Britain was a new member. Most member states had already passed equal pay legislation and Britain was obliged to ratify Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome which banned discrimination against women. As even the EOC recognised, it was not that the EEC was controlled by feminists, but simply that its members were concerned to establish stable ground rules for the business of capitalist competition:

'The article was included not so much out of concern for women's rights but rather to ensure that free competition was not distorted by any member states allowing employers to use women as cheap labour and so undercutting its competitors in other EEC countries.'³⁶

The women's rights legislation was a useful token concession to the women's lobby – particularly for the post-1974 Labour Government. While Labour supporters proclaimed great strides forward towards women's emancipation, employers' organisations, management consultants and right-wing politicians and journalists worked overtime to devise ways of making sure that the concessions remained purely token. They were very successful.

Employers evaded the 1975 legislation in three main ways. They increased the segregation of their workforces (thus limiting the scope for comparisons); they intensified their exploitation of their female workers

(making sure that if they did get more money, they worked even harder for it); and they moved towards the establishment of a general female rate (equivalent to the lowest rate for men). If all these devices failed, they resorted to a series of fiddles.

Segregation along sexual lines was, as we have seen, already marked in British industry well before 1975.³⁷ This meant that there was very limited scope for establishing equal pay through parity: what scope there was, the employers tried to reduce even further.³⁸ They moved women out of certain jobs where they were in a minority and men out of other jobs where they were outnumbered by women.³⁹ The *Financial Times* admitted that 'the equal pay legislation in combination with the law against discrimination will provide some employers with a positive economic motive for being more discriminating than before'.⁴⁰ Trade unions often colluded with management in their sectional concern to preserve male rates and men's jobs.⁴¹

The second method employers used was to intensify the work women did to pay for their own wage increases. The Institute of Personnel Management put the general position:

'The cost of increases... will have to be met out of increased productivity. In order to assess whether the national is likely to be in a position to meet these costs, we must not overlook the possibilities for increased productivity as an outcome of eliminating the sex differential'.⁴²

Snell illustrates how this worked in practice, for example through the deliberate alternation of incentive schemes. Piece work rates were 'tightened' to offset the increases women received in their basic pay. In one case the women workers had to work harder and produce 40 per cent more to earn the same amount of incentive pay. Their average hourly earnings remained at 60 per cent of men's, although the basic rate had been increased to 90 per cent of the male rate.⁴³

One section of the Equal Pay Act forced employers to bring women's wages up to the lowest, unskilled male rate. This clause was included so that women who couldn't compare themselves to men would get a basic increase. However, the way this worked out in practice was that many women — even though they might be semi-skilled or skilled workers — were placed on the lowest male rate. Meanwhile, all male workers, apart from perhaps a couple of labourers, would be put on much higher rates.⁴⁴

The five-year implementation period of the Equal Pay Act (1970-75) gave employers ample time to organise their working arrangements to minimise the benefits of the legislation for working women. Paterson and

Armstrong drew up a list of the more devious methods that were widely used in addition to the three basic evasions outlined above:

- (a) re-grading jobs on the basis of the degree to which the work is heavy or light, which would automatically discriminate against women
- (b) eliminating, or at least reducing, jobs performed by both men and women so as to avoid direct comparisons
- (c) re-classifying jobs at present only carried out by women at women's rates. These would no longer be graded as women's jobs. Instead, they would in theory be open to both men and women, although in practice the job descriptions would not correspond with any work at present carried out by men. In this way, the minimum rate which has to apply to men and women could be lower than the existing minimum rate for men, so long as it is not below any nationally negotiated rate
- (d) refusing to introduce any form of job evaluation because it could encourage equal pay claims
- (e) ensuring that the terms and conditions of employment are different at associated plants to discourage comparison between establishments
- (f) simply not engaging women on the grounds justified or not, that increased absenteeism and higher rates of turnover would make them a less economic proposition than men paid at the same rates.⁴⁵

It was widely predicted that the new women's rights laws would have dramatic and far-reaching consequences. However, it became rapidly clear to all the parties involved that in reality the legislation would change little.

Before the introduction of the Equal Pay Act 79 per cent of managers questioned claimed that it would affect their working practices. After it came into effect only 42.5 per cent conceded that it had had any effect at all on them.⁴⁶ Politicians made extravagant claims: Barbara Castle estimated that about 70 per cent of women workers would benefit from the Act. Audrey Hunt's survey of the operation of the Act revealed a much less rosy picture:

'Equal pay for women doing the same or broadly similar work as men existed at the time of the survey (early 1973) in 34.9 per cent of all establishments. In a further 18.1 per cent there are no women doing the same work as men. 19.9 per cent have had equal pay for 10 years or more and only 4.1 per cent have introduced it in the past two years (since the EPA was passed).'⁴⁷

Right-wing Tories and *Daily Telegraph* journalists ranted about the new legislation making women into a privileged class. The gutter press backed them up ridiculing 'women libbers' and taking up the cudgels on

behalf of 'oppressed men'. The more sober bourgeois commentators could see from the beginning how limited the laws were: this was the *Financial Times*' comment on the day of their implementation:

'A few famous victories will be won and proclaimed: women will eat their roast beef downstairs at Simpsons in the Strand,⁴⁸ some well-qualified woman somewhere will bring a case against an employer and get a job from which she was debarred by prejudice, some women in some occupations will get more pay. . . . The truth up to date is probably that there are few jobs in which women have been undercutting men in the labour market: the traditional "women's occupations" have become so clearly defined by custom that no comparability is possible, while in genuinely mixed areas — journalism and teaching for example — equal pay is already the rule.'⁴⁹

The legislation made little difference to middle class women because they mostly already enjoyed equal pay. It made little difference to working class women because the main obstacle to their equality was the continuing burden of domestic work — and that remained outside the terms of either of the new laws.

Middle class women achieved parity with men because capital needed their labour. Non-manual civil servants won equal pay in 1955, partly because they fought for it, but mainly because the government faced a shortage of labour with the requisite skills. Of the 10 per cent of women who had equal pay in 1966 most were professionals working in the state sector — in the civil service, local government, teaching, medicine, etc.

Table 8 Full-time female manual workers' average weekly earnings as a percentage of men's

	Public	Private
1950	55	
1955	52	
1960	51	
1965	49	
1970	52.4	48.9
1974	58.5	52.8
1975	61.1	56.7
1976	63.2	59.6
1977	63.1	60.4
1978	62.2	60.9
1979	59.2	59.4

Source: Office of Manpower Economics, *Equal Pay*, HMSO, 1950-65, p11;
EOC *Fifth Annual Report*, 1980, p70

Female manual workers have generally been paid at rates little more than half of those for men in similar jobs. This has changed little over the past 30 years as the previous table illustrates.

The position of working class women did improve slightly in the mid 'seventies, but deteriorated again by the end of the decade as the recession began to bite.

The history of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts reveals that although the capitalist system can promise rights for women, it cannot deliver the goods. The fine phrases of politicians are constantly defied by the operation of a system that depends on women's oppression in the home.

Abortion

Both feminist and left-wing commentators claim that, since the introduction of the 1967 Abortion Act, women's legal right to abortion has come under serious threat on only three specific occasions. These moments of danger were when the White, Benyon and Corrie Bills were introduced to amend the Act — but each time the attack was successfully beaten off. They are mistaken; even within the strict limitations of the 1967 Act, women's right to abortion has been under constant attack. The deterioration of NHS facilities through public spending cuts and the expansion of the private sector have steadily eroded the right to abortion for working class women. No serious response to this whittling away of women's rights has yet come from the left, the women's movement or the trade unions.

The formulators of the 1967 Act envisaged that it would allow for around 10 000 abortions a year for women in various special circumstances. No extra facilities were provided to deal with the relatively small demand expected. However, women's response vastly exceeded expectations; it proved that there was a social need for readily-available abortion. The NHS facilities could not meet the need even before the cutbacks of the 'seventies began. In the ensuing crisis abortion facilities have suffered even worse than other health service amenities. The statistics illustrate the extent of the problem. The demand for abortion has risen almost constantly since 1967, but the proportion of abortions carried out on the NHS has steadily declined.

It is not yet a question of an absolute decline in the number of abortions carried out on the NHS; it has remained fairly constant. As the squeeze on public spending continues, however, the further run-down of the health service must bring about a fall in the actual number of abortions on the NHS. Women's access to abortion is increasingly restricted to the

Table 9 Legal abortions carried out on women resident in England and Wales⁵⁰

Total number of abortions	Place of abortion		Percentage of abortions on NHS
	NHS	Private	
1969 50 000	34 000	16 000	68.0
1971 95 000	53 000	41 000	55.8
1973 111 000	55 000	55 000	49.5
1975 106 000	51 000	55 000	48.1
1976 102 000	51 000	51 000	50.0
1977 103 000	53 000	50 000	51.5
1978 112 000	55 000	57 000	49.1
1979 119 000	55 000	64 000	46.2

Source: *Social Trends*, HMSO, 1981, Table 2.23

private sector, which includes non-profit making charities and fat-profit making clinics. Throughout the 'seventies, the charities managed to bridge the gap between the demand for abortion and the inadequacy of NHS provision for those women who could not afford the private clinics. The charities too now face the full onslaught of the recession: facing burgeoning costs, they are increasingly unable to keep pace with rising demand. In 1977 they covered 29 per cent of all abortions; within three years the proportion had sunk to 25 per cent. The private clinics, meanwhile, have enjoyed a boom. Between 1977 and 1980 their share of the market increased from 20 per cent to 29 per cent.

The move towards the privatisation of abortion facilities, which has gathered momentum from the day the 1967 Act was passed, has made access to easy abortion more and more restricted to women with access to money. Private abortions are often well beyond the financial reach of working class women with families. It is the more middle class women who are able to afford abortion. At the same time, the state has proved willing to provide abortions for those young women whom it considers unfit for motherhood — unemployed teenagers, single blacks. The result is that women with no children accounted for 45 per cent of the abortions carried out in 1978. Married women with between one and three children, who often have most need of abortion and childcare facilities, made up only 28 per cent of the abortion figures for that year.

Whilst this attack on women's abortion rights has continued apace over the past decade, opposition to it has centred solely on the attempts to restrict abortion by legal means. Those who have opposed the attempts

by White, Benyon and Corrie to amend the Act have demanded a defence of the 'spirit' of the law. In fact, as the Tory amenders themselves have pointed out, it is *they* who are trying to recapture the spirit of '67.⁵¹ The Act was passed, not to provide free abortion on demand, but to allow for the strictly limited availability of abortion that capital required. The government wanted to make abortion available for middle class women whose working skills were in demand, and for those working class women considered incapable of carrying out their maternal responsibilities. The Act left the responsibility for deciding whether or not women requesting abortion fitted either of these categories solely in the hands of the medical profession. It is not surprising that doctors have been to the fore in campaigns to protect the 1967 Act. The legal stipulation that two doctors must endorse a woman's request for an abortion gives them considerable power. One consequence of this 'Doctor's right to choose' has been massive regional variation in the proportion of abortions carried out on the NHS. In the North of England, 4915 of the 5619 abortions carried out in 1980 were under state provision, leaving only 39 to the private clinics. In the West Midlands, where the medical hierarchy is predominantly Catholic, only 3013 of the 14 050 abortions carried out in the same year took place on NHS facilities. Women's fight for abortion on the NHS has to contend not only with the economic problems of capital in general, but also with the reactionary beliefs of individual members of the bourgeoisie.

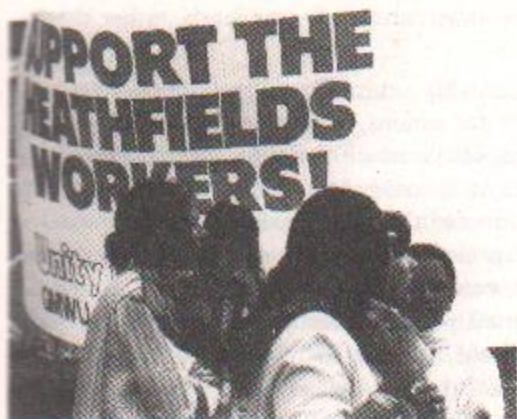
The attempts at legislative amendments of the 1967 Act are real attacks on women's rights which the working class must reject. It is, however, significant that all the attempts to further tighten up the Act have so far failed: but it has still become much more difficult for working class women to get an abortion. The fight for abortion rights cannot therefore be confined to defending the 1967 Act.

The ruling class aims to restrict the debate over abortion to legal, medical and moral questions. Unfortunately many groups and individuals who seek to defend abortion rights accept these terms of reference.⁵² Thus for example in 1982 a great controversy arose over the Government's attempt to remove the clause justifying abortion on 'social' grounds from the appropriate form, and the opposition to this on ethical grounds from prominent pro-abortion gynaecologists. The vital question of *social control*, which the call for free abortion on demand raises, has always been avoided.

GIVE US A



Chapter 5



Part of the union?

British trade unionists have generally regarded women as a threat. Their unions' response to women workers has changed over the years — from outright hostility, to the modern approach which seeks to integrate women into the unions without in any way challenging their subordinate role in social production. Women have always been the poor sisters of the British labour movement, at worst rejected, at best patronised with token gestures.

Trade unions arise spontaneously out of the basic conflict between employer and worker in the capitalist workplace. In their most elementary form trade unions are defensive, sectional organisations. They come into existence in response to the need of a particular group of workers to combine their strength to force their employer to concede decent wages and conditions. Workers' combination challenges one of the capitalist's most powerful weapons — his capacity to spurn the demands of his workforce and turn to the free labour market and hire workers who will accept his terms. It is easy to replace one worker; much more difficult to find hundreds or even thousands of scabs. Skilled workers are even more difficult to replace. Hence the first trade unions arose among artisans who were able to take advantage of their skills and their collective organisation to achieve a degree of control over the labour market. These craft unions were militant in defence of their position against the employers; they were also hostile to other sections of the working class that threatened to undermine the stability of the labour market on which their position depended. Foremost among these were women, who were seen by most early trade

unionists as potential scabs or undercutters of wage levels, rather than as fellow workers.

Trade unions are not inevitably, eternally or incorrigibly sectional and reactionary. It is possible for unions to transcend their elementary sectionalism and adopt a perspective which subordinates the immediate interests of any group of workers to the broader concerns of the working class as a whole. The condition for this is the existence in the working class of a highly developed proletarian consciousness given shape and direction by a revolutionary party. Such a party can give a clear lead to the trade unions on important political questions. There is a historical precedent. After the First World War the Red International of Labour Unions, established in allegiance with the revolutionary Communist International, insisted that to be worthy of membership, constituent unions must 'free themselves from old prejudices and take on the defence of women workers'.¹

The Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International in the 'twenties meant that its early promise in the sphere of women's emancipation (as in other spheres) was never fulfilled. However, it indicated a possible path of development for the trade unions, as an alternative to the one they have taken over the past half century. In Britain the narrow outlook spontaneously adopted by the early unions was reinforced by the reformist politics that became dominant in the labour movement around the turn of the century. The ascendancy of British capitalism on a world scale provided a solid foundation for reformism. The burgeoning labour bureaucracy provided a cadre to communicate it to the working class.

The reformists aimed at socialism in the distant future; for the time being they accepted British capitalism and its state and sought to reconcile workers to piecemeal reforms within these confines. The Labour Party leaders urged the trade union officials to carry on in their sectional pursuits while the politicians worked to protect the unions' activities through Parliament. Both wings of the labour bureaucracy endorsed the subordination of women at work and in the home, just as they accepted the capitalist economy that depended on it. This tradition of British Labourism had become so firmly established by the First World War that the revolutionary upsurge that followed it throughout Europe had little impact in Britain. It has remained virtually unchallenged ever since. How, then, have women been treated by British trade unions — influenced, as they have been, much more by Labourism than by Bolshevism? We now turn to examine the record: in the spheres of organisation and recruitment, on the issue of equal pay, and on broader questions of women's rights.

Joining up

Women's membership of the unions has paralleled their participation in the national workforce. Until recent years the number of women joining unions lagged considerably behind the numbers going out to work, particularly at the war-time peaks of women's employment. The table below shows the remarkable effect of war on women's trade unionism – the First World War peak was not passed until well into the Second World War. Women's participation in the unions stagnated as they were expelled from the factories after both wars. Although female union membership did not fall as precipitately after the Second World War, it took the best part of 20 years before it regained its war-time level. Women's involvement in the unions exploded in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies in parallel with the expansion of public sector unionism generally, in response to successive governments' incomes policies.

Table 10 Female membership of the TUC

1906	166 803	1945	1 340 729
1914	357 956	1950	1 217 083
1918	1 209 278	1955	1 332 000
1920	1 340 941	1960	1 339 000
1922	870 941	1965	1 691 000
1930	486 090	1970	2 168 000
1933	728 388	1975	2 773 000
1939	552 585	1978	3 341 000

Source: Compiled from *Women workers: 1981*, p40, and diverse TUC sources.

Women, however, were not always accepted into the unions with open arms. We look first at how the craft unions came to terms with women – and how they restructured their unions to maintain the privileges of their male members. Then we turn to the bureaucracy and examine how it has organised to deal with women in its own best interests.

Jobs for the boys

By the turn of the twentieth century the developments in industry were increasingly undermining the position of skilled workers and expanding

job opportunities for unskilled and semi-skilled labourers. Unskilled workers, male and female, appeared as a growing threat to the established craft unions. In the 1890s the London Society of Machine Rulers set up a committee to investigate the problems caused by the entry of women into the labour force. It reported that female labour was 'an evil which would sooner or later have to be met'.² For the bookbinders' union it was later rather than sooner. At its 1901 conference, Mr Balsille for the executive tried to persuade the delegates to accept women into the union:

'We are between two alternatives: that we get the girls in our power, or leave them disregarded for employers to use them against us.'³

However, the conference rejected this argument, and although the debate raged on, it was nearly 20 years before women were finally recognised.

It was to be later still for one of the oldest established unions – the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, later the Amalgamated Engineering Union, now the AUEW. In the First World War it drafted women engineering workers into the National Federation of Women Workers, rather than recruit them to its exclusive club. Indeed, it refused to accept women as members until 1942 – and then it only relented because its own narrow interests were at stake, as its Stalinist national organiser Wal Hannington explained:

'General unions were grabbing female members in engineering and the introduction of mass production techniques forced the skilled men to organise their semi-skilled... sisters before they ousted them.'⁴

The ASE was not the last male bastion to fall. The woodworkers kept women out until 1952 and it was 1959 before the metal mechanics admitted women – as half members. Most of the old unions came to terms with women before the First World War. The brass workers are a typical example. Before 1910 the union staunchly opposed women's right to join the union – its general secretary even campaigned for legislation to bar women from certain skilled trades. However, when the union was hit with a period of high unemployment at a time when women's wages were as low as 30 per cent of men's, it suddenly changed its tune. Following the line of the bookbinders' delegate, the brass workers allowed women to join and insisted on them getting the union rate – to protect the men working alongside them. At the same time, they made a deal with the employers to secure the continuing predominance of men in the skilled trades. This is how one contemporary observer, Elizabeth Hutchins summed up the situation in 1915:

'The men often regard women as unscrupulous competitors, and though they have mostly abandoned the old policy of excluding women, they are apt to try and organise them from their own point of view, without regard to the women's special interests. Rough measures of this kind only give a further impulse to schism, confusion and bitterness.'⁵

The industrial unions followed the policy of recruiting women as an alternative to facing direct competition from them, outside their control. At the same time, they ensured that skilled jobs were restricted to men. Women made up more than half of the workforce in textiles. Yet the textile unions remained under the control of skilled men. They insisted that women get union rates – but they also made sure that they remained in the unskilled grades. The National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, including a substantial proportion of women, followed a similar policy. The union most open to women was the National Union of Clerks. The desperately low wages of women workers, in a sector which was in transition from being a male preserve to one in which men were in a minority, made it vital that they be drawn into a union for which equal pay was a top priority.

The unions' attempts to maintain their protection of male (skilled) workers at the expense of female (unskilled) workers persist to this day. This is how one union delegate from the engineering workers' union put his view to the TUC Conference on Equal Pay in 1973:

'I would suggest that it is the task of each union to decide which is a man's job and what is a woman's job, and how it should be paid. At this moment in time, where we are organised, it is the union which tells the employer – at least it is in my union – what is a skilled job and what is a non-skilled job.'⁶

Women and the trade union machine

When the TUC established its General Council in 1921 to act as 'the general staff of labour' it included a Women Workers' Group and guaranteed women two places on its governing body. This move marked the formal integration of women workers into the official labour movement. Around the same time, the National Federation of Women Workers became a division of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (now the GMWU), and the Women's Trade Union League was incorporated into the TUC. However, the TUC recognised women as trade unionists only to ratify their inferior position in society. The Women Workers' Group's first initiative was a campaign supported by the government, to train women

as domestic servants. At the same time it endorsed the action of the 1924 Labour Government in stopping unemployment benefit to those 'not genuinely seeking work': for women this meant those who were not prepared to take menial jobs as servants to the rich:

'Just as the trade union... movement accepted direction of women to domestic service, they also accepted (the) cutting off of uncovenanted benefit to married women.'⁷

The TUC continued to give bureaucratic acknowledgement to its female membership. During the 1926 General Strike it gave the two women on the General Council a major role — on the Food and Essential Services Committee. Concerned at the decline in women members, the TUC held its first women's conference later the same year. This was, and remains, firmly controlled by the General Council and has no policy-making powers. During the Second World War the TUC set up a Women's Advisory Committee to deal with the special problems arising from women's wartime employment. In recent years the TUC's committees on women's issues have proliferated, but their essential functions have remained the same — to raise recruits and make appropriate gestures on women's rights while constantly safeguarding the interests of the bureaucracy.

Recruitment was the preoccupation of the Working Women's Group from the start: between 1918 and 1923 the female membership of the general unions fell by 78 per cent. Early campaigns, 'encouraging the study and spread of the principles of trade unionism among women',⁸ relied on unimaginative tactics such as leafleting women workers and urging male trade unionists to get their wives and daughters to join up. Nobody even suggested that the unions should push a programme of demands for women workers as a way of making unions appealing to them.⁹

The revival of women's employment in the 'thirties led to a recruitment drive with a slightly different orientation. General secretary Walter Citrine proposed that the unions present membership as something in *women's* own interests, rather than as an advantage to the unions and their largely male membership. This became the main emphasis of the TUC's 1936 'Back to the Unions' campaign — still based on leafleting. The following year Citrine's imagination went a step further as he launched the 'Beauty and Health' campaigns that continued until the outbreak of war. The idea was that joining a union was essential for women who wanted to earn sufficient money and work in good enough conditions to stay looking young and lovely.

Probably despite these campaigns, women's membership of the unions

rose as rearmament and war pulled them into the factories. However, after the war, membership again stagnated and the TUC again turned to the question of how to make itself attractive to women. Again the answer was bourgeois public relations, not working class politics. Former Stalinist official Margaret McKay became the TUC's Women's Officer in 1950. She initiated the 'feminine' approach to recruitment, using fashion shows at the Co-op and outings for the kids to draw women into the unions. The idea spread. Trades Councils often put on 'wives' nights' and the National Union of Bank Employees (now BIFU) concentrated its efforts on 'interesting young women in trade unionism by hairstyle competitions, beauty and cooking demonstrations and, above all, rock 'n' roll parties'.¹⁰ Jive or no, membership rose by 150 per cent.

Today the style has changed but not the politics. Now the bureaucrats adapt to the feminist notions popular in the white collar unions in which they are keen to spread their influence. 'A woman's place is in her union' is the modern message; there are still few who argue the prior point that 'the union's place is behind women's rights'. When we look at the record of the bureaucracy we see that it always puts its own interests first and those of women a long way behind.

The TUC's women's organisations and representatives have often acted as female mouthpieces for the reactionary politics of the bureaucracy as a whole. Thus in 1926, the Women Workers' Group replied to the bourgeois feminist Open Door Council's campaign for the removal of all protective legislation by citing a Home Office report:

'Women were on unskilled processes not because of legislative restrictions but because of their own attitudes, attitudes which envisioned only a short period of industry and in turn caused managers to be unwilling to train them for skilled occupations.'¹¹

Women's inferior position in industry was attributed not to laws, and least of all to capitalist social relations; women themselves were to blame. The notion that the central problem in unionising women is overcoming women's backward attitudes — not the backwardness of the unions — has remained a deeply held prejudice of the bureaucracy.¹²

In addition to giving a female voice to traditional labour movement prejudices, the TUC's women's committees have acted as troubleshooters for the bureaucracy. During the Second World War the Women's Advisory Committee quashed women's objections to suspension of protective practices and the enforcement of low rates for women. When the war was over it helped to ease women out of the factories to make way for returning soldiers. TUC women's organiser Florence Hancock suppressed a series

of rebellions at women's conferences in these years. Militant women were forced to toe the TUC line and troop in and out of the labour market in response to the changing needs of British capitalism.

In more recent years the TUC's women's organisations have continued to play the role of reconciling women's demands with the concerns of the bureaucracy. The TUC's record on equal pay and other questions of women's rights illustrates this.

The fight for equal pay

The TUC has a consistent record on equal pay. It has been in favour of it since the 1880s, particularly at times when there was an influx of women into the labour market. When women's unemployment was high, the TUC lost interest in the issue. Whatever the state of the labour market the TUC has never used its industrial strength to enforce equal pay for women.

Up to and during the First World War the labour bureaucracy supported the cause of equal pay for women to protect the wages of male trade unionists from being pushed down by the competition of growing numbers of women workers. After 1914 the trade union leaders' national chauvinism exceeded their male chauvinism: in the war effort they agreed to women taking over the jobs of skilled men. The more strongly organised unions – especially the engineers – insisted on two conditions for this cooperation: that women be expelled from the factories once war ended, and that in the meantime they should be paid the full male rate for the job. In a number of instances engineering workers took strike action to enforce these conditions. In more weakly organised industries, however, women were forced to do men's jobs at wages closer to the traditional levels of pay for women. The union leaders stuck to the principle of equal pay while attempting to unionise women as unskilled workers, thus maintaining the established differential between male and female rates. When war was over the unions supported the Restoration of Pre-war Practices Act. The slogan of the tramway workers' union summed up the message – 'Tram men and peace: women must go'.¹³

In the 'twenties and 'thirties the bureaucrats felt little threat from women workers: equal pay was accorded a very low priority. The renewed influx of women into the labour market resulting from rearmament and war, however, revived TUC interest in the issue. Again, the unions made deals with employers and the government: they would accept women into men's jobs as long as the men's rates were accepted.¹⁴ The

TUC's principle of equal pay did not extend to areas of industry where only women worked — for women's wages. Employers found it easy to get around these agreements by the now familiar ploys of altering production processes or reclassifying jobs to make them non-comparable.

One of the few concessions the wartime dictatorship made to women whose super-exploitation it supervised was the Royal Commission on Equal Pay, set up in 1944. However, when this reported in 1946, the war was over and a Labour government was in power. It rejected a general introduction of equal pay because of the costs it would involve to British capitalism. The commission explained that if women were paid the same as men there would be no reason to employ them; and, more importantly, industry would be deprived of a source of vital cheap labour. The Labour Government gratefully accepted the report — but rejected its final proposal that equal pay should be introduced in one sector, the civil service. It would cost too much.

Labour's denial of even this limited advance towards equal pay raised a storm of protest among women in the white collar unions. Although Florence Hancock succeeded in diverting a proposal at the 1946 Women's Advisory Conference for a direct confrontation with the Government into a protest to the TUC General Council, the campaign gathered momentum. It was only halted by the Labour Government's 1948 wage freeze, endorsed by the TUC. Again Hancock saved the day for the bureaucrats at the 1948 Women's Conference, castigating the angry civil service delegates for refusing to place the nation's economic needs before women's need for equal pay.¹⁵

During the 'fifties only two unions were concerned about equal pay. The civil servants carried on a limited campaign for equal pay for their largely middle class sections, until they won their demands in 1955. Their moderate campaign (including Valentine cards for the Chancellor — 'be true to us on Budget Day') succeeded because of the shortage of skilled workers in the higher grades.¹⁶ Equal pay in the civil service still excluded all manual workers. The other union was the engineers', still worried about protecting its men's rates. It finally gave up as employers remained intransigent and local militancy forced up differentials between male and female earnings.

In the 'sixties a number of factors combined to make equal pay a major issue. An expanding economy drew more women out to work; technological innovation in industry rendered traditional skills — and traditional differentials — obsolete. Many women, irked by discriminatory wage levels, began to join unions and take action demanding equal pay.¹⁷ They soon came into confrontation with governments seeking to use wage

restraint policies to hold down the living standards of the working class.

The first industrial action for equal pay in the 'sixties took place in the civil service. Equal pay had been slowly introduced over a seven-year period in the higher mixed grades — but the telephonists, virtually 100 per cent female, were missed out. In September 1961 they embarked on a nine month work to rule. They finally won equal pay. Partly in response to this dispute and partly in response to simmering discontent in other unions, the 1962 TUC adopted a charter of demands for equal pay and skills training for women. It succeeded in avoiding a commitment sought by the Women's Conference for a campaign of 'mass demonstrations, pickets and industrial action' on the issue. In 1963 the TUC passed another equal pay resolution, this time demanding legislation to enforce it. The Labour Government returned in 1964 soon persuaded the TUC to abandon these radical commitments.

Harold Wilson, following the lead of the post-war Labour Government, told the TUC that his government simply could not afford equal pay for women. The 1965 TUC dropped its high sounding talk about 'equal pay for equal work' and called instead for equal pay on piecework through negotiation at local level. Many women were angry at this back-tracking, sectional approach, but the introduction of a statutory incomes policy blocked further advance towards equal pay. The TUC Women's Conference helped to let off steam, passing motions condemning pay restraint, but preventing any serious challenge to the government.

The Ford machinists' strike of 1968 (see page 76) broke through the barriers of TUC-Labour Party complicity. At Ford the engineering workers' union tried to appease its militant female members by winning agreements which granted larger wage increases to women than to men. It seemed that even such extraordinary measures would be insufficient to contain women's anger over the pay issue. In response to the Ford strike and the enormous interest it generated among women workers, the union leaders set up the Trade Union and Labour National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights. As its cumbersome name suggests, this committee was built for safety rather than for speed, but it still staged trade union demonstrations for equal pay and called a national conference in November 1968.

TUC Women's Officer Ethel Chipchase made the position of the bureaucracy clear. The TUC was prepared to uphold the principle of equal pay, and to publicise this commitment to recruit women into the unions. But taking on a Labour government to win equal pay — that was not on. Equal pay, said Chipchase, in a statement that sums up the advice of generations of union bureaucrats to women workers, would be achieved

'by evolutionary processes, but evolution is a very long time. If you want revolution you must do it yourselves'.¹⁸ For the Labour Government, Barbara Castle declared that equal pay could only be achieved by cutting men's wages. Women workers had to await the return of a Tory government in 1970 before equal pay legislation was finally passed.

A woman's place

After 100 years of rhetoric about women's rights, the TUC remains firmly attached in practice to the view that a woman's place is in the home. The unions have often campaigned to win female recruits; they have sometimes taken limited steps to defend the rights of women at work; but they have never challenged women's role as domestic workers in the family.

Prominent trade union leaders have often glorified women's 'contribution' to the national economy and pompously demanded a meaningless 'recognition' of women's domestic services. Transport leader Ernest Bevin appealed in these terms (strikingly anticipating some modern feminists) to the 1922 TUC:

'It is a challenge to the state to recognise by law that the work the mother gives in the home is of definite value to the state. . . I have often argued during wage controversies that any industry has not only to get from the working classes the muscle and skill of the men, but that it claims also, or gets, the great unpaid services of the women as well. This is a contributory factor to our industrial prosperity.'¹⁹

The TUC itself has continually emphasised the vital importance of women's role as domestic workers. The 1933 TUC Women's Conference called for married women workers to be provided with training in 'plain cooking, mothercraft, hygiene and physical culture'.²⁰ Five years later, General and Municipal Workers' leader Charles Duke explained why he considered that aspirations to equal pay and union posts were futile for the union's 43 000 female workers:

'If you say here that a woman carrying full domestic responsibilities is as free to do her job as a man is to do it. . . you had better look the facts straight in the face; it is one thing in the Congress to exalt sentiment, and another thing on an executive body. Face up to realities!'²¹

Instead of campaigning to alleviate women's burden of 'full domestic responsibilities', the TUC chose to face up to the 'realities' of the needs of capital and the demands of the craft unions, and sanctioned both material and ideological attacks on women workers.

We have seen that during wartime the union leaders relaxed restrictions on women's access to certain skilled jobs. They also agreed to the suspension of protective legislation so that there were no legal barriers to the super-exploitation of women.²² However, they still did nothing to force the government to continue after the war the sort of childcare facilities it provided to lure women into the factories in the early 'forties. On the contrary, the TUC was complicit in the run down of nurseries. In 1947 it echoed the 'back to the home' claptrap of the bourgeoisie and its ideologues:

'There is no doubt in the minds of the General Council that the home is one of the most important spheres for a woman worker, and that it would be doing a grave injury to the life of the nation if women were persuaded or forced to neglect their domestic duties in order to enter industry, particularly where there are young children to cater for.'²³

The TUC's concern for the new generation of workers was still tempered by its loyalty to the current generation of capitalists. When in May 1947 the civil service needed 300 000 more women to staff its expanding clerical grades, the TUC came to the assistance of the government with promises of day nursery provision and part-time work at 'convenient' hours. Part-time work did indeed expand; women in the civil service and beyond are still waiting for the day nurseries.

The TUC virutally ignored questions of women's rights for the two decades following the Second World War. In the 'sixties, as we have seen, it was kicked into action by militant women trade unionists on the equal pay issue. It was also forced to take up the demand for more and better nursery provision and even, in the late 'sixties, to consider abortion and contraception. In the early 'seventies, the TUC seemed to be taking an increasingly progressive stand. The 1972 Congress voted in favour of industrial action in support of equal pay. This progressive shift reached its peak in 1975 when the TUC voted for 'abortion on request free of charge on the NHS' and joined an International Women's Year demonstration in Trafalgar Square.

But the rot had already begun. The 1975 TUC typically faced both ways on issues of vital concern to women. It voted in favour of abortion, but rejected the radical Working Women's Charter in favour of its own tame charter of women's rights. This woolly document made no mention of abortion or contraception.²⁴ The TUC still produced lots of leaflets

and flashy exhibitions and visual aids to promote its pro-woman image. But the recession was on, Labour was in power and the TUC was not about to do anything more substantial to advance women's interests.

In the late 'seventies the TUC gave up any attempt to tackle the real problems facing women workers and settled for tilting at the shadows cast by the structures of women's oppression. In this it was greatly assisted by the right-wing shift in the feminist movement which we examine in the following chapter. The women's movement turned away from any strategy of making demands of the trade union leadership that it take up key issues of women's rights, towards notions of autonomy, individual fulfilment and self-help: it thus let the TUC off the hook. Feminists brought their preoccupations with counselling, self-help health collectives, battered women's refuges and self-defence classes into a space willingly provided for them inside the official machine by the union leaders. For their part the bureaucrats got away with token gestures on fringe issues of women's oppression.

Through the late 'seventies and into the early 'eighties the TUC has remained inert in face of the onslaught on women's rights conducted through cuts, closures and mass redundancies. Legal attacks on maternity rights, the rights of part-timers and the provisions affecting women in the Employment Protection Act have met little resistance from the union leaders. But the conference halls of the labour movement have echoed to denunciations of sexism in the media (NUJ), sexism in school books (NUT) and sexual harassment at work (NALGO).²⁵ Feminism, treated as an object of ridicule by the male chauvinists of the TUC up to the mid 'seventies, became widely accepted once its protagonists gave up making awkward demands of the bureaucrats. As the first issue of the TUC's *Women Workers' Bulletin* in 1981 declared: 'the women's movement is no longer simply a joke'.²⁶ For the bureaucrats it had become a convenient diversion, for working women it was an irrelevance.

The main focus of the TUC's token commitment to women's liberation was its support for programmes of 'positive action'. The meaning of this catch-phrase was spelt out in a supplement to the 1981 TUC Report.²⁷ The Report called for the insertion of 'equal opportunity clauses' into collective agreements, for adverts to declare this commitment, and for personnel managers to eliminate 'unconscious bias'. These proposals may have impressed some feminists and created more committees for the bureaucrats, but they changed nothing for working women. Their capacity to participate fully in social production was constrained less by 'unconscious bias' and more by harsh economic realities. A report on 'positive action for women' by the white collar engineering union TASS to the 1980 TUC indicated the real problems:

'They had selected three factories in which to set up pilot affirmative action programmes. Before they could get started one closed down, and unions in the other two found themselves dealing with heavy redundancies.'²⁸

Of course when it suits its own interests the TUC is very realistic about what can be achieved at a time of recession. It refused to countenance the suggestion of 'positive action' to break down the rigid and discriminatory access to craft apprenticeships still controlled by some unions. And it also rejected the proposal that women be trained to acquire traditional male skills:

'Caution had to be exercised, . . . in encouraging girls to undertake secondary or further education courses, or vocational training, related to fields of employment traditionally regarded as mainly suitable for men, since their employment prospects might be impaired as a consequence.'²⁹

The TUC was also realistic about how far 'positive action' could be deployed to make the structure of the unions more open to women's participation. The 1980 TUC Women's Conference passed a resolution demanding that the unions take positive action to make it easier for women to achieve high office — or simply attend branch meetings. The conference suggested one simple measure that the TUC could take up with the government and employers: the demand that workers be allowed to hold union meetings during working hours, thus facilitating women's attendance. The General Council said 'be realistic':

'There were no prospects of any legislative improvements from the Conservative Government and the question of pressure for a general legal right to hold meetings during worktime would be considered at a more opportune time in the future.'³⁰

The integration of feminism into the outlook of the bureaucracy allowed it to reduce its traditional approach to domestic work to a new level of triviality. For the TUC, the problem of women's burden in the home became simply a question of sharing out the housework. All that was required was an education programme among male trade unionists 'to ensure that all workers understand the right of women to be able to work and therefore the need to share domestic responsibilities'.³¹ Notions of housework-sharing have become combined with the idea of job-sharing in some of the more middle class unions. Women could get more and better jobs; men could be freed to look after the household. 'What is

wrong with job-sharing, with two people doing one job with shorter hours without loss of pay?' asked Angela Phillips of the journalists' union in the *Morning Star* in 1979:

'A man who was with his child from the beginning learnt that babies were not just screaming nuisances but fascinating, giving, changing creatures. . . he would have a totally different attitude to childcare.'³²

But the burden of domestic work cannot be abolished by spreading it more thinly over the working class. Women cannot gain jobs by dividing men's jobs in half – this is just a stage of more intense exploitation on the way to more redundancy all around.

We oppose the bureaucrats' specious solution of housework-sharing because it lets both them and the bosses escape from their responsibilities. Of course men should share housework to make it marginally easier for women to fight for their rights. But this is not a solution to women's oppression. Only when the bosses are forced to pay for the services the working class needs – nurseries, free canteens and laundries – will women begin to taste real freedom. TUC leaflets encouraging men to do the washing up do not challenge the privatisation of domestic work. The TUC is not prepared to challenge the capitalist system that depends on women's oppression. The call to share housework costs the bosses not a penny – it is a demand the TUC makes on the working class. The real alternative is to force the trade unions to make demands of the capitalist class and fight for them.

Women take action

The limitations of the trade unions become most apparent when the unions are faced with their most basic but most important responsibility – the defence of workers in struggle. Here, we review the most significant of the strikes involving women workers from the 'sixties to the 'eighties. The strikes by the Ford machinists (1968), the Leeds clothing workers (1970), the night cleaners (1972), the Trico machinists (1975), the Grunwick workers (1976-78), the Lee Jeans machinists (1981) and the Liverpool typists (1981), are only the best known examples of women's trade union struggles. But the experiences and difficulties which characterised them are common to the many disputes in which women have been involved, ranging from the strike by the civil service telephonists in September 1961 to the health workers' dispute of 1982.

Women's struggles over the past 15 years have been of two distinct types, corresponding to two different phases in the crisis of British capitalism. From the close of the post-war boom in the mid 'sixties to the onset of the deepening recession of the mid 'seventies, women generally took action on women's issues — for equal pay, for decent wages as women workers or for trade union recognition. Since the recession has really begun to bite women have found themselves fighting on the same issues as men — against redundancies, closures and wage cuts — often with substantial male support. There is a widespread misconception that the main barrier facing women workers today is the attitude of male workers. However, any study of the major disputes of the 1968 to 1982 period reveals that men have generally supported their female fellow workers in struggle. The major problem that has plagued every manifestation of women's militancy is the politics of the trade union bureaucracy.

The Ford machinists' fight for equal pay

The strike in summer 1968 of women machinists who sewed car seat covers at Ford's Dagenham plant displayed many of the features which were to become typical of the wave of women's strikes into the 'seventies. The women were militant and determined; their male fellow workers were sympathetic and supportive. The union officials, however, were sectional and conservative — their divisive approach greatly restricted the potential of the dispute.

Despite having to undergo a skill-test before being taken on, the women machinists were graded as semi-skilled and paid accordingly. The union officials refused to make a particular issue of the women's case; they treated the machinists as just another section of the workforce as they renegotiated pay structures and wage levels throughout the year. After months of getting nowhere, 187 machinists walked out on 6 June, demanding upgrading and an extra 5d (2 pence) an hour.

The National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB — now part of the TGWU) to which most of the women belonged, at first wanted nothing to do with the strike. The first union to make the strike official was the engineering union (AEF) which saw a good chance to present itself as a defender of women's rights and recruit a bigger share of the many women expressing a new interest in the unions. The engineers promptly issued a leaflet depicting a girl in a mini-skirt, bearing the legend: 'Welcome to mini-skirts but not to mini-wages. Join the fight for equal pay the AEF way'. It soon became clear that the AEF way was the same as that of the other unions.

The timing of the strike coincided with the vehicle builders' annual conference. In an effort to win effective backing from their union, two coachloads of Ford machinists arrived at the conference with banners flying to lobby the delegates. Getting little response outside, they decided to invade the meeting hall. Embarrassed into making a gesture of support, the conference rushed through an emergency motion giving official union backing to the strikers. Yet for the duration of the dispute, official support never went beyond the union's meagre strike pay. The main concern of the NUVB and the other Ford unions was to contain the machinists' militancy.

The most effective solidarity action came not from the unions, but from other workers. At Ford's Halewood plant, 195 women machinists in a similar situation to those at Dagenham also came out on strike. Sections of the male workforce at Ford also came out in spontaneous support of the women's claim. Rose Boland, one of the two women shop stewards at Dagenham, made clear the women's approach to winning their brothers over: 'This is not a sex war', she declared, 'the men machinists are out with us and we have good support from the men generally'.³³ The machinists' broad support had little to do with the efforts of the union leadership. They made no attempt to bring the rest of the men out in support. Indeed, Lord Cooper, the leader of the General and Municipal Workers, denounced the strikers as people 'interested in organising chaos', who 'do great harm to industry'.³⁴

When the women's action began to bite, and the bosses moved to lay off 9000 workers (mainly men) as a first step towards closing the whole of Ford's UK operations, the union representatives on Ford's top National Joint Negotiating Committee (NJNC) ran for cover. Refusing to confront the bosses' obvious attempt to divide the workers along sexual lines, the unions caved in and advised the women to return to work. The women unanimously told them where to stick their proposal for a five-man 'independent' inquiry, and continued their strike action. To maintain some degree of control over the strike committee the unions kept up token official support, while looking for a way out of a dispute which now threatened to get out of hand.

The bosses' concern over the strike, and the widespread public support the women were receiving, had now reached the point where the Labour Government had to intervene. Barbara Castle, newly created Minister of Employment and Productivity, invited the strikers to tea. She then brought in the car industry's top troubleshooter, Sir Jack Scamp, to head an official court of inquiry. The women's response indicated their priorities. 'Court of inquiry or not', they made clear, 'we are not going

back until we get the money.'

On 28 June, the women voted to reject Scamp's appeal for a return to work while he completed his inquiry. But within three days the strike was over. The majority of trade union members of the NJNC, representing a minority of Ford workers, had accepted a rise of 7d (3 pence) an hour on behalf of the strikers. That meant that the women's wages would rise from 85 per cent of the men's to 92 per cent; but they remained stuck in the semi-skilled grades. The bureaucrats tried to placate the women by promising a 'full and fair hearing' of their case at the Scamp inquiry, and slapping them loudly on the back for achieving their 'victory'. 'The Ford women will be clocking on for work today with victory smiles on their faces', proclaimed the *Morning Star's* front page.³⁵ But just who was *really* smiling over the outcome was made clear in the following day's edition. Jim Conway, engineers' leader and secretary of the union side of the NJNC, could barely contain himself:

'This is a great victory. We are very happy about this. The value of the NJNC has been more than justified.'³⁶

Like the man said, the 'victors' were the bureaucrats. They had proved their value to the bosses as a stabilising force within the working class, only too willing to sacrifice women workers' interests in return for a little consultation and recognition of their worth. What they had expected in return was made clear by the NUVB in its submission to the court of inquiry:

'Trade union officials were very concerned with the Ford system of job evaluation. They objected that the basic method of deciding the value of a job was decided secretly between Ford and a firm of consultants.'³⁷

The inquiry got the message. While finding that there had been no sexual discrimination against the women, the court suggested that the bosses and their consultants move over a little to let the bureaucrats in at the table. Accordingly a committee of management and union representatives was established to look into the points under dispute in the job profile. The Dagenham women had seen this sort of sell-out before; and they were determined not to let it happen again. While their union leaders got down to negotiating their rights away, the women embarked on a new overtime ban. But their advantage had been lost, and it wasn't until 1974 that the first 12 of 300 women workers were finally classified as skilled.

In demanding recognition of their skilled status, the Ford women's

strike did more than establish a pattern for years to come. It captured the imagination of thousands of other women and woke the Labour Party up to the very real danger of a wave of similar strikes, as women began to see the possibility of achieving something from industrial action. Ten days into the 26-day strike Labour MP Shirley Summerskill caught the mood of those in the Labour Party concerned about the need to keep the lid on industrial unrest if the Government's wage control was to stand any chance of success:

'Problems about the incomes policy will look like a cosy little tea party compared with the chaos of a petticoat revolution. The Government must legislate for equal pay before it is too late. . . . The strike could spark off serious industrial unrest which cannot be ignored. Working women can make or break the economy. The downtrodden women of today are the strikers of tomorrow.'³⁸

More than any other single event, the potential for a revolt of working class women contained in the Ford women's strike was responsible for the timing and content of the 1970 Equal Pay Act. The Act did not prevent similar disputes from taking place; but the experience of the dispute at Ford left the union leadership well prepared for future sell-outs.

Leeds: the clothing workers' struggle

The repercussions of the Ford dispute had barely settled down before striking women were back in the headlines. The Leeds clothing dispute of 1970 is an excellent example of the potential for effective, united working class action in defence of women's rights. It also demonstrates the limitations of trade union militancy and the need to take on the union leadership.

Since the Second World War, Britain's declining textile and clothing manufacturers have concentrated their new factories in depressed areas. Here the steady stagnation of traditional industries left large numbers of unemployed workers, particularly women, who could be cheaply employed to ensure a high return with little capital outlay. By 1970, 85 per cent of the half-million workers in the clothing industry were women. Many were not in any union and all were paid – thanks partly to the disgraceful record of the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers (NUTGW), the largest union in the industry – starvation wages. In 1969, the national executive of the NUTGW concluded a national agreement with the employers which illustrated how deep was its concern for the women who made up 93 000 of its 111 000 members. The agreement amounted to a rise of 5d (2 pence) an hour for the men and 4d (1½ pence) an hour for

the women, bringing the minimum rates to 6/7d (33 pence) an hour for skilled male workers, 4/9d (24 pence) an hour for skilled women, and less for the unskilled. There was also a dangerous productivity element in the agreement which stated that 'where an hourly rate is paid plus an incentive bonus, the hourly rate may be less than the general minimum time rate'. Displaying a rare gift for turning a bonus into a wage cut, the NUTGW signed the agreement without reference to the membership.

The new deal came into force on 1 January 1970. When clothing workers in Leeds attempted to present their own claim, for a one shilling (5 pence) an hour rise for both men and women, which had been formulated before the terms of the national agreement were known, they were presented with the terms their union leadership had negotiated as a fait accompli. It didn't take the women workers long to register their opinion of the union's agreement. On 22 January, women at the Burtons factory in Leeds came out on strike. The NUTGW moved quickly to contain the women's anger, and succeeded in coaxing them back to work the next day with promises of discussing their grievances through the proper channels. But the writing was on the wall; as the *Yorkshire Evening Post* noted, the unofficial strike 'was the first time for more than 30 years that all the women had come out together'.³⁹

Ten days after the Burtons skirmish, the strike began in earnest at John Colliers' three factories in Leeds. Two thousand workers, most of them women, came out in support of a claim for a 7d (3 pence) an hour rise for male workers and an 8d (3½ pence) an hour for women. They demanded this increase *on top* of the national agreement: their total demand for a one shilling (5 pence) rise, across the board. By the fourth day more than 1000 clothing workers, drivers, cleaners and production workers were out. The NUTGW executive demanded that they return to work. It condemned the breaking of the national agreement and the solidarity shown by the men and women alike as 'the negation of everything that the trade union movement stands for'. The Colliers' bosses shared the union's concern to maintain the traditional structure of unrepresentative negotiation and sell-out: 'We are not going beyond the terms of the statement by the NUTGW', said the employer's spokesman, 'As far as the company is concerned, we have nothing to add to it'.⁴⁰ Whilst the rotten bloc of union leaders and management united against the strikers, the women stepped up their action with startling effect.

On 12 February 1980, 1250 Colliers' workers marched through Leeds, surrounding five other clothing factories and chanting 'out, out'. And out the women came. Excited by the prospect of bringing all the city's clothing workers together to confront the appalling conditions and wages they

had faced for years, 3500 workers had joined the strike by Friday 13 February. And the union's luck was not about to change. The following Monday, eight more factories were besieged by the marching pickets. At a mass meeting of all those now involved – well over 5000 from 17 factories – union officials were shouted down. Harry Yates of the NUTGW received the perfect answer to his appeal to the strikers to 'support your officials'. One striker demanded: 'When are you going to start supporting us?'.⁴¹ When the full-timers had left with their tails between their legs, the strikers elected their own strike committee to run the dispute.

At another mass meeting two days later, contingents from the 9000 workers now on strike unanimously approved a vote of 'no confidence' in branch, district and national officials. On the following day there were 15 000 workers from 35 factories on strike. Action was spreading to towns outside Leeds, and there was talk of a bus drivers' strike in support of the clothing workers. The unofficial strike committee was discussing the real possibility of a national stoppage, and nothing seemed beyond the reach of the strikers. The NUTGW wrote to the bosses, urging them to remain resolute against the unofficial action and assuring them of continued union support for their fight against equality.⁴² But the employers were beginning to show signs of strain. They offered to resume negotiations on the wage claim immediately after a return to work. The proposal was put to a mass meeting of more than 5000 workers on 25 February and overwhelmingly thrown out. The solidarity between the men and women on strike remained 100 per cent. However, three weeks of unofficial action with no strike pay had begun to bite into the workers' savings, and some of the clothing manufacturers were trying to get their workers back with slightly improved offers. Rumours that the Colliers' workers had accepted such enticements were squashed by one worker who grabbed the microphone to announce that 'even if we were offered everything we are asking for today we would still not return to work; we want every clothing worker in this city to get a rise before we return'.⁴³ The employers' attempt to divide and defeat the strikers had failed. But the bosses had little cause for alarm; the union had finally pulled itself together and was coming to their rescue.

The bosses were losing confidence in the NUTGW as it lost control of its members. The NUTGW now changed tack and turned to the shop stewards, not all of whom were on the strike committee and not all of whom were committed to winning the dispute at any cost. At a meeting on 24 February the executive called over 150 stewards together and put the latest 'offer' to them. The bosses had agreed to meet the union executive within 48 hours of a return to work, and the executive was willing to recall the union general conference – which normally met only once

every two years – to discuss any offer from the employers. The stewards were deeply divided, but the leadership finally won through by 84 votes to 74; a return to work was agreed.

For the stewards to agree to a return to work was one thing; to convince the strike committee and the women themselves was another. In the end it proved straightforward, as the union was able to exploit the one commitment it shared with the strike committee: the commitment to keep the British clothing industry competitive. As the International Men's and Boyswear Exhibition (IMBEX) at Earl's Court approached, the bosses pleaded that they needed to present their businesses in the most attractive and reliable light lest they lose out to foreign competition. Unfortunately for the women workers, their strike committee agreed. In a statement recommending a return to work on 2 March, the committee noted that 'IMBEX will be held shortly and we hope to increase British export performance'.

On 2 March all major firms reported normal working. Talks between the union executive and the bosses began the next day, and were immediately adjourned to 12 March, to allow the Clothing Manufacturers' Federation to hold emergency meetings of its district associations. The union presented the bosses with a breathing space which allowed them to get out their Easter orders, thereby throwing away the workers' most powerful lever. News of this caused unrest in several factories, and the strike committee issued a statement warning of 'guerrilla action', but urging 'all workers not to take action on their own but to wait for co-ordinated action, if we deem it necessary, by the strike committee'.⁴⁴ Once this last chance for rejecting their leaders' compromise had gone, the back of the strike was broken. When the final pay offer was revealed, it amounted to a rise of 10d (4 pence) an hour for women and 8d (3½d pence) an hour for men, in addition to the 4d (1½ pence) and 5p (two pence) respectively, they had already been awarded. But whereas the strikers had demanded that it be back-dated to 1 January, the union and the employers had decided that they should wait until it was paid in two stages on 1 April and 28 September. On 25 March, the NUTGW national delegate conference met, and overwhelmingly voted in favour of accepting the offer despite protests from Leeds branches. The conference applauded the strikers, but made it clear that it 'saw the future of the union as one of militancy directed along official channels'.⁴⁵ Harry Yates, the NUTGW district organiser responsible for getting the women back to work was credited with the 'victory', whilst general secretary Jack Macgougan crowed about the promised productivity bargaining at factory level. Once again, the bureaucrats had proved their worth to the employers, and would

be rewarded by more say in how the bosses could make their profits. The clothing workers, predominately female, had achieved something, but were still a long way from equal pay. And things were to get worse.

Since 1970, the crisis in the British clothing industry has worsened dramatically. Many of the factories involved in the strike have closed, others have lurched along on the backs of their women workers, who still suffer the same miserable wages and working conditions. The political weakness of the union militants — their acceptance of the employer's right to make a profit and consequent failure to reject outright the productivity-based national agreement — has left the women workers without any consistent defence. Yet, the 1970 strike contained tremendous potential for overcoming these problems. It indicated the willingness of male and female workers to unite in recognition of the specific oppression women face in being trapped in low paid jobs, and the tremendous power such unity can unleash against the reactionary leadership of the trade unions. The Leeds women may have failed to smash the grip those leaders held over the NUTGW, but at least they smashed the windows of their union office, and in the course of the strike, they broke the illusions of many women workers in the bureaucracy. In this, they were to act as an inspiration to other working class women during the 'seventies, as the all too short battle for equal pay took off on the shop floor.

The night cleaners rise up

The concentration of women in segregated low-paid jobs has rendered the Equal Pay Act virtually useless. Between 1970, when the Act was passed, and 1975, when it was implemented, employers deliberately increased the segregation of their workforces to get around the Act. Some bosses, however, had no need of such tactics. Their workforces were already 100 per cent female; and their wages were rock bottom. One such group of workers was the night cleaners. For these women, mostly married with young children, nightwork was the only way they could supplement the family income. Many worked for private contractors who made handsome profits from an industry with few overheads and low wages. After 1968, this included cleaners working in government buildings. In that year, the Labour Government sacked the 300 cleaners it directly employed at the Civil Service union rate of £19 a week, and put the work out to contractors who paid at the most £14 a week, including bonus.⁴⁷

By 1972, the women night cleaners at the Ministry of Defence in Fulham had had enough. Their numbers had been cut from 35 to 11 over a 12-month period. The remaining women had to clean 27 floors and 1200

offices in conditions so bad that many of them brought in their own polish and carpet sweepers. They received £14 for a 45-hour week with no sickness or accident benefits, and no trade union recognition. The women put in a claim for a £3 a week rise, a 40-hour week, paid holidays and the right to be represented by a trade union; the contractors responded with an offer of £1. When the women turned this down, the boss promised them a rise of £2.50 and union recognition. But at the same time, he approached two of the cleaners and asked them to persuade the workers to accept his offer without going through their Civil Service Union (CSU). Angry at this attempt to deny them their rights, the women struck on 30 July 1972 in support of their full claim. The strike was the culmination of an eight year campaign by May Hobbs and her Cleaners' Action Group for union recognition and higher wages, during which several victimisations had been successfully resisted by industrial action and Hobbs had been blacklisted. May Hobbs was a militant member of the Communist Party who dismissed the relevance of her political affiliation by demanding that the press 'go down and ask any of the cleaners if May Hobbs has talked politics to them'. She described the women's anger at the Victorian conditions:

'Vacuum cleaners and electricity are the only things which make it different from Dickens' time. We have got more respect for the Mafia. They don't exploit cleaning ladies like these bastards do.'⁴⁸

For May Hobbs and the Ministry of Defence cleaners, the question of union recognition was at the centre of the dispute. For them this was not an end in itself, as trade union officials always see it, but as a basic right of workers which was the only way to ensure decent wages and conditions. The difference in the rates of pay of cleaners in unions compared to those without official representatives was, and has remained, enormous.⁴⁹ But, despite the fact that the women placed union recognition at the top of their list of demands, the CSU showed little interest in supporting the dispute. At their first meeting with the strikers, the union officials refused to give the strike official status. Instead, they recommended that the women accept the bosses' offer and go back to work immediately. When the women refused, the CSU advised them to keep the dispute as quiet as possible. They shouldn't mount pickets on the Empress State Building where they worked, because 'the strike is not official, the contractor cannot bring in scab labour because official passes are needed — so why not go home?'.⁵⁰ The women told the union officials they were used to staying up all night and had no intention of going anywhere. The next day, other CSU staff in the building, including the

messengers, took supportive action. Faced with a growing groundswell of support for the strike, the union decided that making it official would be the best way to ensure that the militants in the Cleaners' Action Group didn't get out of hand. On 4 August the CSU backed the dispute, making it the first official cleaners' strike ever.

The night cleaners' dispute attracted tremendous interest and support. A week after the strike began, 20 other cleaners employed by the same contractor at the Admiralty building in Whitehall came out in support of the same demands. At the Ministry of Defence building, Post Office engineers refused to maintain the telephones, and refuse collectors refused to remove the building's rubbish, until the cleaners' claim was met. Against their union's advice, the women mounted 24-hour pickets outside the building and received solid backing from other workers. The picketing was very effective, as Marian Scally, the cleaners' shop steward, later explained:

'Everyone stopped at the picket line. We stopped the mail, taxis, the beer, milk; even the Royal Navy trucks wouldn't cross it.'⁵¹

As the women's action threatened to become more militant and more widespread, the CSU stepped in. In an effort to force the employers to negotiate, the leadership blustered about calling on other unions to support the strike, 'even if it means closing down the Empress State Building'.⁵² Such threats were empty, as the women themselves had won the support of the workers from other unions involved. But they maintained the CSU's credibility, and enabled the union to claim some of the credit when the bosses finally capitulated.

On 17 August, after two and a half weeks on strike, the cleaners at both buildings returned to work: they had won their demands for a £3 rise and union recognition. The limitations of formal union recognition were quickly illustrated on their return, when the 20 workers from the Admiralty Building were almost immediately laid off, as their contract had ended. None of them were re-employed, nor did their union attempt to safeguard their jobs. The CSU was content to sit back on its new-found right to negotiate.

The night cleaners' strike for trade union rights was a direct response to their particular oppression as women. Only women with small children and no available childcare facilities could be forced to work such unsocial hours for a pittance. The right to join and be represented by a trade union is a fundamental one for all workers; but for women it is meaningless unless unions are prepared to fight the root of oppression which leaves mothers in the worst sectors of employment. In rebelling against their oppression, the night cleaners won the support of male workers, whilst

the official leadership of the CSU and of the other unions made no positive contribution to the strike. The CSU's involvement was limited to paying the women £10 per week in strike pay. The transport workers' union, which organised private sector cleaners as well as many of the workers involved in supplying the government buildings, refused to meet the night cleaners because its union offices closed at five o'clock.⁵³ The refusal of the bureaucrats to broaden their conception of union recognition to include a recognition of the specific problems faced by working women ensured that victories such as that won by the cleaners remained both limited and isolated.

Trico

A series of strikes involving thousands of women workers kept equal pay a live issue up to the mid 'seventies. Most of these strikes took place before the EPA was fully implemented in 1975, but perhaps the most important of them took place at Trico in 1976. This was the first significant test of the Act and the last major strike for equal pay before the recession forced women workers to turn to the defence of still more basic rights.

The Trico factory in Brentford, West London was a major producer of motor accessories, manufacturing windscreen wipers for Ford, British Leyland, Vauxhall and Chrysler. The company had previously avoided equal pay by segregating its workforce: the nightshift assembly workers were all men, the dayshift exclusively women. But by September 1975 the recession in the car industry forced management to cut back and it was decided to axe night production. To avoid the potentially explosive issue of compulsory redundancies, the company offered the male assembly workers a choice: they could either take voluntary redundancy or a job on the dayshift. All but five chose to go, and those five were subsequently installed alongside the women workers, having lost their one-third night-shift allowance but retaining their previous basic rate. This left them around £6 a week better off than the women who, on the company's admission, were doing exactly the same job. Confronted directly by the reality of unequal pay, the women workers demanded that their wages be brought into line and turned to their union, the engineers' (AUEW), to do something about it.

The local official went into lengthy negotiations with the bosses. Eight months later, the women were exactly where they had started, and they had had enough. The bosses insisted that the extra 'flexibility' of the male workers (they had switched shifts and the women hadn't), made them a special case. And anyway, they promised, equal pay would come in by the end of the year. They proposed to equalise wage rates, by freezing

the men's wages and allowing the women to catch up. This was unacceptable to the Trico women. Angry at the employer's intransigence, and frustrated with the union's empty talking, the women held a mass meeting on 24 May 1976, and voted to strike.

The strike by 400 women backed by 150 men lasted 21 weeks. The strikers saw 1000 Trico workers cross their picket lines every day, faced violent clashes with the police and scabs, boycotted an industrial tribunal — which found against them — and turned down three offers from management. None of these offers conceded to equal pay: one proposed bringing the women's wages closer to the men's by 'awarding' the female workers the 4½ per cent rise they were entitled to under the Labour Government's incomes policy and withholding it from the men; another offered an extra 50p in return for productivity increases. At the end of 21 weeks, the company gave in. The women won the full £6 rise, and marched back into the factory, to take their places alongside the men on the assembly line.

At first sight, it may appear that the union involved, for once, put up a credible defence of its female members. The AUEW made the dispute official within four days and supported the women in boycotting the tribunal and arranging solidarity action. However, closer inspection reveals serious limitations to the union's support.

The AUEW's acceptance of the need for strike action only followed the exhaustion of all the much-preferred channels of negotiation. Even then, the unusual speed with which the Broad Left-dominated district committee moved to make the dispute official was little more than a recognition of the militancy existing amongst the women and a desperate desire to contain it. Similarly, it was only after three weeks of picketing, when it became obvious that the women were determined to stick it out, that the AUEW national executive gave it official backing. Because of the peculiar circumstances of 1976, the union leadership had a broader interest in the strike. Under sharp criticism from sections of their membership for their acceptance of the Labour Government's policy of incomes control, the AUEW bureaucrats saw supporting a strike for equal pay — which was exempted from the restraints of the Social Contract — as a convenient way of presenting themselves as active fighters for their members' interests.

From the beginning, the union leaders' objective was to negotiate a compromise. They jumped at every opportunity to return to the negotiating table. Even their boycott of the industrial tribunal was only a ploy to force the company into direct talks. Hugh Scanlon, the AUEW president, made it clear that the union was not rejecting the principle of arbitration:

'The union had not decided to boycott tribunals on equal pay as a

matter of general policy. The possibility of appearing at a future hearing on Trico was not ruled out.⁵⁴

The AUEW's strategy was to control the strikers and strengthen the hand of the bureaucracy for future negotiations.

When union officials were faced with a more direct choice between bourgeois legality and working class militancy, they knew which side they were on. When 200 police fought to clear a path into the Trico factory for scab lorries and the women fought back, the union asked them not to try to stop the scabs because of the legal implications. They later tried to calm the women's anger by forwarding complaints against the police to the Home Secretary. Similar vacillation characterised the union's organisation of solidarity action. The bureaucrats' moderating influence undoubtedly dragged out the dispute. It took more than two months to organise a ballot of the 16 000 local AUEW members on a five pence a week levy in support of the strikers. And a further two weeks passed before the union took the elementary step of approaching workers at the second Trico factory in Northampton, where production had continued throughout the London dispute. The women working at this factory were paid even less than the strikers, and were completely unorganised. When they were finally approached by the AUEW, 80 of the women immediately joined the union, elected two shop stewards and pledged their support for the dispute.

The most flagrant example of the union's narrow, sectional approach to the dispute was its failure to mobilise the support of the vast majority of the men at the Brentford factory. Although the dispute was 'official', the officials made no attempt to call out the factory as a whole. The 1000 workers who crossed picket lines into the factory every morning included many of the strikers' husbands and some of the AUEW stewards. The union's acquiescence to this situation left deep divisions within the workforce, which came to a head when Trico laid off the rest of the 500 production workers. The press took full advantage of the situation, playing on the fact that married couples were standing on opposite sides of the picket lines. *The Sun* proclaimed: 'We're on sex strike, say wives in equal pay fight'.⁵⁵ *The Daily Express* confined itself to heart-rending tales of 'when love is tested on the picket line'.⁵⁶ The AUEW did nothing to overcome the 'petticoat pickets' image of the strikers. The mass pickets of car workers and others and effective solidarity action that finally swung the balance, were organised by the women themselves. The final result was that a factory which contained great potential for united working class action in defence of women's rights, finished up with a labour force more deeply divided than ever. One consequence was a right-wing backlash

amongst the male workers, who blamed the strike for the lay-offs and sent a letter to Hugh Scanlon 'expressing no confidence in the union executive which has been responsible for this dispute'.⁵⁷

As for the TUC, it remained silent throughout the strike. Committed to the Social Contract, the top bureaucrats were anxious to avoid being forced to support militant industrial action. Even when the women strikers descended on the TUC Conference, the leadership managed to palm them off with a woolly resolution 'urging the government to tighten up the Equal Pay Act'.⁵⁸ The TUC's most fervent wish of the Trico strike was that it would end, no matter what the outcome. *The Economist* commented on the common view of the TUC and the Labour Government:

'The Department of Employment and the Trades Union Congress are remaining studiously disinterested in the outcome of Britain's longest-ever equal pay strike. Least said, soonest mended.'⁵⁹

The 1976 dispute at Trico demonstrated both the potential for organising women into a fighting force and the dangers of the divisive sectionalism pursued by the union leadership. The working class attitudes which the women strikers took on issues such as the police and industrial tribunals have largely been forgotten. Those are the lessons which must be learned if we are to make our unions fit for women to join.

Grunwick

The strike which began at the Grunwick film processing laboratories in Brent in August 1976 lasted almost two years and became one of the best-known disputes of the decade. The Grunwick dispute reached its peak in the summer of 1977, when up to 18 000 workers battled with the police outside the factory gates. It subsequently fizzled out to end, almost unnoticed, in July 1978. The Grunwick struggle has been celebrated – by the union leaders – as a fight for trade union recognition. Some have seen the strike as a fight for the rights of black workers. Few attempts have been made to assess the significance of the dispute from the point of view of the 60 per cent of the strikers who were not only black but also women.⁶⁰

The miserable wages and conditions which provoked the initial walk-out by a handful of Grunwick's Asian workers are common to thousands of black women. Black women are even more oppressed than their white sisters. Isolated in the peripheral sectors of the economy, black women face those employers who can least afford the benefits which workers have wrung from bosses elsewhere. One of the Grunwick strikers explained the

'slave treatment' of a 40-hour week for £25 with compulsory overtime and few holidays, like this:

'What I mean by slave treatment is that if a woman is pregnant, for example, she can't get time off to go to the clinic. The management says why can't we go on Saturdays, but the clinic is not open on that day. . . . Many of our women have small children at school or in nurseries. The management tells you halfway through the day that you *must* work overtime that night — but this is terrible because you can't pick up your children and you can't contact your home.'⁶¹

Throughout the dispute, the unions refused to recognise the specific oppression of women as an issue. For them, the democratic rights of black women workers were subordinate to the rights of the trade union bureaucracy to negotiate with management. And, when it came to a showdown, everything was subordinate to upholding the law and avoiding embarrassment to the Labour Government.

When the first Grunwick workers, led by Jayaben Desai, walked out on 20 August 1976, none of the factory's 170 workers were union members. Through the Citizens Advice Bureau and the TUC, the strikers applied for membership of the white collar Association of Professional Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX). APEX was a right-wing union with a poor record on women's rights. During the 1972 miners' strike, APEX members amongst the coal board's women clerical workers crossed NUM picket lines; at Doncaster they were spat on by striking miners.⁶² It may seem strange that APEX was willing to take on a group of Asian women and students who were already in dispute with a virulently anti-union boss. The motivation behind the union's involvement is, however, readily discernible. For APEX, veteran of many inter-union disputes over recruitment and 'poaching' of members, the Grunwick dispute offered a way into the largely non-unionised small business sector where immigrant workers are concentrated. As far as the union was concerned, the issue was a straightforward one of the leadership's right to negotiate on behalf of their members and prospective members. The rights of black women workers didn't get a look in.

After the formalities of membership were completed, APEX made the strike official on 31 August. Their approach to the dispute became immediately apparent when, the very next day, it jumped at an offer from the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) to mediate in the conflict. However, George Ward, managing director of Grunwick, was having none of it: instead he sacked the strikers. For the next two months APEX continued to press ACAS to intervene; the union also won an empty promise of 'all possible assistance' from Len Murray,

the general secretary of the TUC. By November the strikers were sick of their union's promises of swift success and militant action. As the strike committee's account of Len Gristey, senior area organiser of APEX, put it:

"Through the long hard winter that was to follow, he would regularly say that he had tricks up his sleeve that Ward had never heard of. Some of the strikers nicknamed him "Elbows" Gristey, because that was about all there was up his sleeve."⁶²

The union leadership's attempts to limit the strike to the arbitration process, where they could be sure of controlling it, became a constant feature of the Grunwick dispute. In January 1977, the Grunwick strike committee was picketing the factory and sending pickets out to chemists' shops dealing with the firm. Meanwhile, APEX general secretary Roy Grantham 'threatened' to submit a claim for fair wages under the Employment Protection Act. Only after Ward formally rejected ACAS's findings in favour of union recognition, was Grantham forced to take the dispute a step further. He appealed to the TUC Finance and General Purposes Committee for a statement condemning the company and pledging the support of the trade union movement.

The TUC agreed, but its support was to be strictly limited by the law. The bureaucrats' narrow conception of the strike as a simple issue of trade union recognition to be settled through negotiation and compromise ruled out any possibility of effective solidarity action. John Lyons, general secretary of the Electrical Power Engineers' Association, captured the attitudes of the various union leaders involved in his explanation of why his national executive had refused to cut off Grunwick's electricity supplies as requested by the strikers:

'Our members have a statutory obligation to supply electricity to the community without discrimination. . . there could never be any question of our Association calling on its members to set aside this basic obligation. . . Once started down the road, we would indeed be on the highway to anarchy. The genuine issue at Grunwick remains. . . It is that employees have a right to choose to belong to a union and seek recognition through legal procedures laid down by Parliament. . . On that issue we must continue to support APEX in its effort to establish the reality of this right by lawful means.'⁶⁴

The union bureaucrats went to great lengths to avoid 'anarchy' (ie effective working class action) when the mass picketing of Grunwick began in June 1977. After three days, clashes between police and pickets had led to almost 100 arrests and made the dispute national news. The Cricklewood postal workers reintroduced the earlier unofficial blacking on

Grunwick mail that their executive had stopped earlier in the dispute. Ward complained that 'the continued postal blacking, against a company that does 84 per cent of its business by mail order, was a knife at the jugular'.⁶⁵ Unfortunately for the Grunwick strikers, it was also against the law, and UPW leader Tom Jackson wanted nothing to do with it. He sent a telegram to Cricklewood postal workers ordering them: 'Work normally, do not break the law'. When his members refused and stepped up the action Jackson threatened to suspend them from the union and stopped all 'hardship pay'. The blacking was called off, at the height of the summer season when it could have been most effective, and the union leaders avoided a confrontation with the courts.

Throughout June and into July, as the mass pickets fought with the police, the TUC fought to keep the strike under control. On 11 July, after 18 000 demonstrators stopped the scabs' bus entering the factory, the TUC led the pickets away from the gates to a rally at a local park, thus allowing the blacklegs to go to work. Arthur Scargill, already arrested once at Grunwick and back to lead the large miners' contingent on the picket, was berated by those who wanted to stay and keep the buses out. He replied simply that 'the bus never got in while the Yorkshire miners were there'.⁶⁶ While Scargill was busy making empty gestures, the less flamboyant union leaders were trying to bring the dispute back into the realm of negotiation. On the same day as the mass action took place, Lord Scarman opened his inquiry into the dispute; on the following day, the High Court found in favour of ACAS over Grunwick. Buoyed up by this legal 'victory', APEX persuaded the strike committee to postpone any further mass pickets or demonstrations until after Scarman had gathered his evidence. The court of inquiry closed on 27 July, and a mass picket for 8 August was planned. But things had gone too far for the union leadership. The Grunwick strike committee was hauled up to the APEX head office, where government minister and APEX member Denis Howell blustered about a 'conspiracy to undermine the union'. Prime Minister James Callaghan intervened personally, and APEX threatened to withdraw strike pay. On 'Black Friday', 29 July, the Appeal Court overturned the High Court decision for ACAS and found in favour of Grunwick; the postal workers were finally coerced into ending the blacking and the strike committee, under tremendous pressure from all sides, called off the demonstration for 8 August. The strike was effectively over.

APEX now concentrated its efforts on appeals to the House of Lords. When the Scarman report recommended reinstatement of the strikers and union recognition, APEX offered Grunwick a compromise including phased reinstatement, a guarantee of no closed shop, and arbitration in

future disputes. Ward rejected Scarman and APEX. The union, terrified of any repeat of July's pickets, was running out of legal channels. It announced that 'there are no tactics available for winning the dispute that are not either illegal or damaging to the electoral chances of the government'.⁶⁷ The strike lurched on for another 10 months until the strike committee finally called it off in July 1978.

In August 1977, Jayaben Desai complained to an emergency conference that for the past 10 months the strikers had 'drowned in sympathy but thirsted for action'.⁶⁸ At the end of the dispute, she was in no doubt as to who was responsible for the lack of action: 'It was not the mass picket that made the TUC not support us. They did not support us *before* the mass picket'.⁶⁹

Trade union leaders who put themselves, the law and the Labour Party before women workers can never defend women like Jayaben Desai. Achieving the right of women, particularly black women, to work free from the worries of childcare, pitiful wages and appalling conditions means confronting the power of capital and the state head-on. The lesson of the Grunwick strike is that the union leaders are as much of a hindrance to winning that confrontation as any small businessman could ever be.

Lee Jeans

In recent years, equal pay strikes have largely disappeared. Most disputes now involving women workers are about fighting redundancies or protecting wages from real cuts. Although not specific to women workers, these attacks hit them first and hardest. The problem of the trade union leaders' unwillingness and inability to protect women's rights has, however, remained. Their refusal to fight continues to be the major obstacle to realising potential working class support for a united struggle for a woman's right to work. The occupation of the Lee Jean's factory in Greenock, Scotland, in 1981 is one recent illustration of the problem.

The American VF corporation, which manufactures Lee Jeans, set up the Greenock factory in 1970 with the aid of massive state and local government grants. By the mid 'seventies, even state subsidies and low wages could not make the factory a viable business. The company began to plan a move to the more favourable climate (even more subsidies, even lower wages) in the Six Counties of Ireland. Finally in January 1981, VF announced its intention to close the Greenock plant to the works' shop stewards. The plan meant redundancy and almost certain long-term unemployment for the 240 workers, virtually all of them women.

The factory was a closed shop organised by the Tailors and Garment

Workers' union. From the beginning of the dispute, the union representatives displayed the same concern for maintaining the bosses' profits as they had done during the Leeds clothing workers' strike. The union officials took as their starting point the observation that other companies with far less healthy accounts than VF were weathering the crisis, so why couldn't Lee Jeans survive? And even if some cutbacks were necessary — which they were willing to accept — why had Greenock been picked on? The union produced statistics to prove that Greenock had consistently been VF's most productive British plant, and then presented their proposals for a fairer distribution of redundancies:

'The union suggested work-sharing throughout all of the UK plants. They also suggested that the company might apply for a temporary employment subsidy from the Government. The union indicated that they were prepared to work only one day per week until things picked up.'⁷⁰

The employers were grateful for the union's offers of assistance in pulling their company through the crisis, but, as ever, they knew their business best. They politely dismissed the union's suggestions for redistributing the effects of the crisis amongst the working class as a whole.

The stewards then presented the news of closure, and the redundancy arrangements, to the women workers without any recommendation for acceptance or rejection. The vast majority of the women, however, voted to fight. Unemployment for women in Greenock was running at twice the Scottish average, and more than 75 per cent of the women were the sole wage earners in their families. They couldn't afford to lose their jobs. All 240 went into immediate occupation of the factory. Their strength was based on the £1 million worth of machinery and clothing they were sitting on. Their weakness was the political outlook of their union leadership.

The NUTGW refused to give the occupation official backing; the officials were waiting to see if the women could be bought off by the bosses' offer of increased redundancy payments. Other sections of the Scottish labour movement were more forthcoming. Supposed bastions of chauvinism such as the shipyards, docks and engineering factories all made generous collections for the women strikers and set up a Broad Action Committee of shop stewards to organise support. Even the Scottish TUC 'lent its might', as the *Morning Star* overstated it,⁷⁴ to the struggle at Lee Jeans. It was six weeks after the sit-in began when support became so vocal that it could no longer be ignored, and the women rejected an improved redundancy payment offer by a huge majority, that the union reluctantly gave the occupation its official blessing.

The NUTGW agreed to pay the women £15 a week hardship money (the costs of the occupation were met by donations from other workers), but refused to initiate blacking. The union leaders were far too worried about the effect such action might have on Lee Jeans' competitiveness in the cut-throat jeans market. Instead, they encouraged the women to look for a buyer whom they could convince of the factory's viability. The Scottish TUC appealed to the Government for assistance in finding a buyer, looking for the sort of subsidies which could induce another entrepreneur to take the women on. And in case the union leaders' 'work-force for sale' approach failed, the TUC set up an action committee to investigate the feasibility of starting a co-operative. It consisted of the general secretary of the Scottish TUC, two of the Lee Jeans' stewards and representatives of the Labour, Scottish Nationalist and Liberal Parties.

The women's struggle attracted massive public support. Incapable of fighting the growing unemployment in the shipbuilding and engineering industries, the Scottish union leaders attempted to associate themselves with the Lee Jeans' occupation. Leading trade unionists joined the women on a five-day march to the Secretary of State's office, to present him with a petition calling for state aid to protect the women's jobs.

Meanwhile, the officials' attempts to establish their own 'productive unit' seemed nearer success when an entrepreneur offered to buy 10 000 pairs of jeans a week from them. The union officials were elated. Convenor Ellen Monaghan commented:

'Finding a market was always going to be our biggest headache. I told the girls that if we maintain the discipline at work which we have achieved in this sit-in, we would have no problem in working for ourselves as a co-op.'⁷²

In selling the idea of a workers' co-operative, the union had also sold the workers down the river. Not for the first time, workers' aspirations to control their factories were used by the union bureaucrats to avoid confrontation and end embarrassing displays of class solidarity. Workers' co-ops are no challenge to the capitalist system on which the union leaders depend. The ultimate 'discipline' they have to obey is that of the law of value; if they cannot produce competitively, then they either go bust or cut jobs and wages. Workers' co-ops, as capitalist enterprises which are forced to accept the need for profitability, are no guard against unemployment. But they are a convenient way out of embarrassing disputes for unions like the NUTGW. The executive finally agreed to impose the long-awaited blacking on Lee products in order to push VF into handing over to a workers' co-op.

The blacking had the desired effect almost immediately. The VF

corporation was stirred into action, but unwilling to let its factory pass to the workers, it sold it instead to its own UK director at well below its value. With a major order in the pipeline, the women's jobs seemed secure. The *Morning Star* declared a 'historic victory' and Michael Foot sent a telegram of congratulations. The NUTGW stopped all strike pay a month before the factory was sold and fully two months before any of the women returned to work, on the grounds that 'the reason for the dispute with the original owners is over'.⁷³ If they meant that they had won the women's unconditional right to work, they were deceiving themselves. The Greenock factory was in trouble again soon after re-opening, and as the crisis bites deeper into the jeans market, the women workers will be faced with inevitable demands for productivity increases, wage cuts and redundancies. The union's acceptance of the bosses' right to make a profit means that the women will have to fight those demands alone.

The women workers at Lee Jeans showed solidarity and guts in their seven-month occupation, and received substantial financial support from the labour movement. But their fight was prolonged needlessly by the NUTGW's refusal to impose blacking for fear of upsetting Lee Jeans' sales. With their utopian ideas of workers' co-operatives and grovelling negotiations with potential investors, the NUTGW placed the premise of profitability before the women's livelihoods at every turn. Any criticisms of the politics of the dispute or blame for future redundancies must be placed squarely where they belong – with the bureaucrats. The women's disgust with their union's failure to support their action should not be forgotten in the glare of apparent success. Temporary triumphs such as that at Lee Jeans will only be turned into victory when the working class points the finger, not at women workers who endure seven months of sleeping on factory floors and travelling the country looking for support, but at those whose responsibility it is to give that support, and who choose instead to try to convince women workers that working harder is a solution to unemployment.

Liverpool typists

The concentration of women workers in the vulnerable low grades of the civil service and local government has made them a prime target of public expenditure cuts over the past five years. As jobs have been lost and real wages driven down, women have turned to industrial action to defend their living standards, many for the first time. Whichever way they turn, they run straight into the same brick wall: the trade union bureaucracy.

The strike by 400 typists, secretaries and machine operators at Liverpool City Council in 1981 began in May as a work-to-rule with selective

strike action. Its object was to secure a claim for regrading which would have given the women a £9 a week rise plus increased possibilities for promotion. The Liberal-controlled city council, led by Sir Trevor Jones, was determined to force through the cuts its budget demanded: it refused to consider the claim. Jones, notorious for his anti-working class posturing, accused the typists of conducting 'a reign of terror against loyal and hard-working members of the council's staff, aided and abetted by the Marxist leadership of the Labour Party, who have used Gestapo-type tactics'.⁷⁴ This set the tone for the employers' attitude throughout the dispute. The women's union, NALGO, failed to produce equally unequivocal support of its members. Once again, the union leadership's only aim was to bring the employers to arbitration.

After the women rejected the council's derogatory offer of £3 a week, the management and union representatives agreed to let ACAS intervene in the dispute. Jones, however, refused to negotiate. On 6 July, the women started an all-out strike. In an effort to force Jones to the table, NALGO gave the strike official backing. However, the union still refused to instigate supportive action among other NALGO members, and kept strike pay at a low enough level to discourage the typists from sustained action.

Both NALGO and the council understood the significance of the dispute. Local authorities all over Britain were attempting to force through cuts in their wage bills – the outcome of the Liverpool typists' strike could set a national pattern. As Jones put in in a local television interview, 'If the typists crack it here, the rest of the country will fall like dominoes'.⁷⁵ The difference between the two sides was that while Jones was willing to go to any lengths to set an example to councils and workers alike, NALGO refused to act as the spearhead for a national campaign. The employers attempted to coax the women back to work with promises that scabbing would go unpunished, whatever the union might say. The NALGO executive remained silent, hoping that the backlog of work which had built up during the dispute would be sufficient to bring the council around to accepting negotiations.

The union wasted the real potential for building up the action which could have led to a quick and complete victory for the women. In September, the council attempted to split the strikers from the rest of the workforce by suspending, without pay, workers who refused to scab on the typists. This ploy backfired when a clerical worker from the solicitors' department was suspended for refusing to write letters by hand; within two hours, 3000 NALGO members from almost every department walked out in protest. The NALGO executive proved unwilling to take advantage of this response even when, by October, 300 of its members had been

suspended for refusing to scab. It took an emergency motion from Liverpool NALGO and an angry lobby of the union's national office before the executive grudgingly agreed to raise strike pay.

By November the strike had finally produced the effect the women required, and Jones agreed to negotiate. Talks broke down almost immediately, however, over the council's insistence that union members who had broken the strike should not be victimised. The NALGO leadership continued to vacillate, but by now the town hall workers themselves had had enough of their union's inaction. On 7 December, they voted overwhelmingly to extend the action and paralyse the city's administration. Faced with such solid support for the strike, Jones was happy to concede to NALGO's limited demand for arbitration. The typists returned to work while negotiations continued, after NALGO threatened to cut off all strike pay if the dispute went on.

Radical commentators on the strike have noted that the ultimate threat of mass action won the day. As one put it, 'faced with this threat, Jones agreed to an "acceptable form of wording" that meant a victory for the union'.⁷⁶ Indeed, it was a 'victory for the union': the women workers themselves had less cause for celebration. The NALGO executive had managed to avoid an all-out strike and at the same time had used the typists to press the council into accepting the union's right to negotiation and arbitration. ACAS eventually awarded the women an extra point on the typists' scale, which meant no immediate pay increase.

Many of the women workers were bitter at their union's conduct of the dispute. NALGO's divisive tactics of pulling out one section at a time and confining a dispute of national importance to the workers immediately involved had failed to break the women's resolve, but it had succeeded in weakening, needlessly prolonging the dispute, and ultimately selling the typists short. Strike committee member Isobel Heskith summed up the activists' views:

'NALGO nationally have kept insisting that this was a local dispute which is plain ridiculous. Our strike is for the low-paid in NALGO nationally. They have let us all down at a time when they should have jumped at the chance to improve their women workers' conditions.'⁷⁷

The Liverpool typists' strike illustrates the willingness of many male workers to face disciplinary action in support of the women who are most open to wage-cuts and redundancies. As attacks on public sector spending build up, that sort of action will become increasingly necessary simply to defend what little women workers have. But the possibility of victory will be lost unless the union leaders can be forced to organise

Chapter 6



Why the women's liberation movement copped out

The labour movement has a poor record on questions of women's oppression. At best it has treated women simply as fellow workers while side-stepping the particular issues raised by their oppression. Problems such as housework, nurseries or abortion are still seen as unrelated to the concerns of the working class. The inactivity of the labour movement has often forced women to fight on their own. Since working class parties have remained indifferent, women who have rebelled against their oppression have done so in isolation from the labour movement. This record has encouraged a point of view which sees the struggle for the liberation of women as something separate from working class politics.

Feminism is an outlook which views the fight for women's rights as a struggle transcending class interests. Beginning from the indisputable recognition that all women are oppressed, feminists go on to argue that the fight for emancipation should constitute a separate sphere of struggle. However, feminism has a record of fighting women's oppression little better than Labourism. The reason for this is that the conflict between class interests has proved more powerful than the forces which bind women together. Thus the Suffragette movement split between those who supported British imperialism during the First World War and those who

didn't. Bourgeois feminists denounced the liberation struggle in Ireland and the Russian Revolution; socialist women took the opposite view. When the vote was finally conceded to women, the feminist movement disintegrated.

The collapse of the feminist movement in the inter-war period coincided with the demise of the communist women's movement. The rise of Stalinism led to the destruction of the working class struggle for women's liberation. After 1925 revolutionary work among women came to an end. Women's liberation became a dead issue for nearly half a century.

The modern women's movement

The modern women's movement is a product of the 'sixties. A period of steady economic expansion brought a degree of security to the middle classes, but it also heightened women's awareness of their subordinate position in society. Beginning in the USA, the most prosperous of capitalist countries, middle class women became aware that material comforts only exacerbated the feeling of powerlessness that stemmed from social inferiority. Women perceived their oppression as a barrier to the fulfilment of individual aspirations; issues relating to economic inequality remained secondary.

This revolt against women's oppression in the 'sixties was part of a wider process of radicalisation which influenced petit-bourgeois youth, particularly students. The radical rhetoric of the day articulated a response to the vulgar materialism of modern society which directly contradicted the fulfilment of individual needs. Middle class radicalisation moulded the evolution of feminism. Like youth, women responded to their experiences as individuals rather than as members of social classes. The fact that individuals were members of a society stratified into classes was not considered important at a time when these individuals enjoyed high living standards.

Feminism was also a reaction to the indifference of the left to the questions raised by the oppression of women. By the 'sixties the left had degenerated so far that it even tolerated philistine practices towards women among its own male supporters. Given its record, it was inevitable that the left would repel rather than attract women to its ranks. Thus the radicalisation of the 'sixties — which had a progressive potential — led to a movement which often defined itself through its rejection of the existing left.

Feminist ideology and practice

The search for the realisation of individual identity has been the most important force in shaping the feminist outlook. The social fragmentation that characterises the capitalist system tends to push people to look for individual solutions to their problems. But *real individuality* is denied to all — particularly to women. Only through collective action as part of a class can this fragmentation be overcome. The consciousness of every individual can develop only through understanding social experience.

Feminism does the reverse. Although real individuality cannot be realised under capitalism, the feminist movement has provided a haven where the experience of being a woman endows individual experience with meaning. The women's movement provided a medium through which the isolated, fragmented and insecure experience of being a woman could be transformed through the assumption of a new identity: *sisterhood*. 'Consciousness raising', 'women talking to each other' and 'small groups' were the mechanisms used to create a new bond.

The emphasis on small groups with 'no leaders' was important, not because — as feminists claim — it gave women confidence, but because it provided every participant with a sense of worth and of purpose. The women's movement's liberal attitude towards debate and discussion stemmed from the desire to stamp every individual experience as unique. One leading publicist of British feminism summed up the prevailing view:

'We have stressed for instance the closeness and protection of a small group and the feeling of sisterhood. Within the small group it has been important that every woman has space and air for her feelings and ideas to grow. . . . We all need to express and contribute. Our views are valid because they come from within us and not because we hold a received correctness.'¹

This celebration of individual experience gave individual feminists an identity. But inevitably this form of individualism could only have meaning within the boundaries of a collective.

The problem was, however, that real life experience dissolved these artificial bonds, and sisterhood disintegrated. This is something that feminists today still cannot face. In a recent article one feminist blames the introduction of 'heavy' theory for the erosion of sisterhood:

'But somehow, between then and now, the theories did become "heavy" enough to lose contact with many women and with their basic impulse of political engagement at every level: that basic feeling that we could connect, through all the contradiction, with all women's life. This belief got blurred. . . . To many women sisterhood became an empty slogan.'²

In fact 'sisterhood' was always an empty slogan. But in the heady days of the 'sixties and early 'seventies capitalist prosperity allowed for a degree of individual experimentation. The slogan 'the personal is political' best summarises this approach.

Social problems are always experienced personally. But as long as these problems are fought from an individual point of view nothing will change. Real change can only take place when these issues are taken out of the realm of private concern and put in the context of the class struggle. The slogan 'the personal is political' is dangerous because it offers an illusory solution at the level of the individual. It ratifies and legitimises the individual fragmentation that capitalist society imposes on everybody in it.

This celebration of individualism was not peculiar to feminism. The left as a whole and the diverse radical movements associated with it also suffered from this myopic approach. The consequence for the women's liberation movement was that it defined its objectives in a way that could not relate to the interests of the mass of working class women.

Sex and class

Most feminists do not deny the reality of the class struggle. However, feminism either subordinates this struggle to the conflict between sexes or depicts gender differences as having an autonomy from class relations. Feminism identifies patriarchy or male-dominated social institutions as the main problems facing women. Male supremacy is portrayed as a problem in its own right and the oppression of women is posed in a way that transcends any specific social relation. This approach corresponds to the appearances generated by capitalist society. Within the family, the man is king and individual men play their part in the oppression of women. The fact that it is not men, but capitalist social relations that oppress women is far from immediately apparent. The oppression of women which is perpetuated by the reproduction of capital is reduced to what men do to women.

Once male supremacy is depicted as a force independent of any specific social formation, then it follows that the struggle for women's liberation should be pursued outside the struggle against capitalism. Even the more left-wing sections of the women's movement, those who call themselves *socialist feminists*, concede a degree of autonomy from the fight against capitalism to women's struggles. Thus one of the more sophisticated exponents of 'Marxist feminism' observes: 'It is not clear why any relationships should obtain between specific forms of male dominance and, for instance, the interests of capital, or at least this cannot be seen as self-evident in any existing analyses'.³

Feminism divorces male supremacism from capitalist social relations. Socialist feminists argue that Marx underestimated ideological problems, and the Marxist approach of historical materialism, according to which ideas are determined by social existence, they dismiss as 'economistic' or 'reductionist'. The autonomy of anti-women ideology from capitalism is an article of faith for feminists. It provides the theoretical justification for rejecting the Marxist approach to women and establishes the foundations for 'sexual politics' as an independent sphere of activity.

The separation of ideology from material relations is an idealist retreat from Marxism. But it has provided the necessary theoretical justification for feminist politics. The attack on historical materialism was not peculiar to feminism: other radical movements of the 'sixties also saw Marxism as too 'deterministic'. They undertook a major revision of Marx to 'free' ideology as an independent sphere. 'Marxist feminist' Michele Barrett welcomed this 'new form of Marxism': 'it has become possible, within a new form of Marxism, to accommodate the oppression of women as a relatively autonomous element of social formation'.⁴

Once the autonomy of oppression is established, the next step is to reject the class struggle against capitalism. Even socialist feminists who do not reduce all problems to men inevitably reject proletarian revolution. If the oppression of women exists autonomously from capital, why should the struggle for liberation coincide with the working class revolution? Barrett draws the inescapable conclusion: 'Not only is socialist revolution not a sufficient cause of women's liberation, but certain important changes could be achieved under capitalism'.⁵

The radical rhetoric of sections of the women's movement often obscures the fact that the very logic of feminism leads to a hostile attitude towards working class politics. The conflict between feminism and class politics became apparent even in the 'sixties:

'It was a terrible test for women who had been brought up on a theoretical diet which specified one absolutely determining contradiction in society — that between classes. There was nothing in the history of revolutionary socialism which allowed even the possibility of the sexual contradiction being instrumental to the organisation of human society'.⁶

The rejection of class contradictions in favour of sexual ones either explicitly or implicitly characterises all types of feminism.⁷ The underlying antipathy of feminism towards the class struggle expresses the conflict between individual fulfilment and the most anti-individualistic act of all: the proletarian revolution.

Sexual politics

The individualistic dynamic of feminism inevitably leads to a preoccupation with personal problems. Much of the activity of feminists has been aimed against different manifestations of the degradation of women. In English speaking countries there have also been attacks on 'male dominated language and culture'. Crude symptoms of women's oppression — such as offensive posters — have become major targets for the feminist movement.

Denunciations of posters, film and language have had a widespread resonance. Indeed this is the one sphere of activity in which all strands of feminism agree. As Barrett notes: 'These are the issues on which, perhaps, feminists are least divided'.⁸ Much of the left has also responded to this aspect of feminist politics. Today, for most liberals and radicals, fighting the oppression of women means saying 'chairperson' and 'spokesperson' and denouncing pornography.

Fighting manifestations of sexism clearly expresses feminist consciousness. Changing culture and the way we speak and behave are worthy aims. But without a fundamental transformation of social relations real changes in personal relations are impossible. Feminism, however, cannot break with its personal preoccupations, because ultimately its main loyalty is to individual change. 'The personal is political', 'self-defined sexuality', 'our bodies our selves' — all these slogans express social matters as individual problems. But the slogans provide only a rhetorical solution — socially constructed relations cannot be altered through individual effort.

Sexual politics represents an abandonment of the fight for the liberation of women. Individual solutions are a retreat from the struggle to destroy the chains that enslave women. They are counterproductive and exclusive: they are in practice restricted to small groups of middle class women and closed to the vast majority of women workers.

Feminist organisation

Autonomy is one of the sacred principles of the feminist movement. In their recent history of the modern movement in Britain Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell stress that from the beginning 'women's liberation developed into an autonomous political movement'. It was 'self-starting, self-regulating and self-directing, owing no allegiance to any other organisation or set of beliefs'.⁹

In reality autonomy means a form of organisation which is exclusive to women. Politically and ideologically feminist organisation is no more autonomous from capitalist relations than is male supremacy. Declaring

autonomy is one thing. But the realities of class society mould and shape all political forces. Feminist organisation is not immune from these forces. That's why leading feminists are to be found working not 'autonomously', but inside the ranks of the Communist and Labour Parties.

Autonomy is really a code-word for small-scale separate women's groups: it provides individualism with an adequate organisational expression. This is how a group of women argued in defence of small group discussions back in 1969:

'Our first priority isn't to get over information, but to know what everyone in the room thinks. We believe in getting people to interact, not listen to experts. We want them to *themselves* make an analysis of their situation, which will lead them to action.'¹⁰

Everyone is a winner! Every individual is unique and special and the aim of the group is to bring this out.

Since every individual experience is valuable in its own right and since every opinion expressed is worthwhile, feminist organisation encourages a strong liberal attitude. Nobody has a monopoly on the truth — one person's view is as valid as the next's. These attitudes are justified by 'anti-elitist' and grass roots democratic rhetoric: hence the suspicion of 'experts' and 'leaders'. Socialist feminists have tentatively criticised this form of organisation for being ineffective. International Marxist Group feminist Val Coultas is 'not so sure that the confusion and indecisiveness of many women's conferences does ensure the maximum participation of all classes of women'.¹¹ In fact Val Coultas misses the point. The whole justification of feminist organisation is that it can cater for women of all classes and opinions. But in reality women express different class interests and different points of view. To prevent these differences from coming to a head necessitates a form of organisation that treats women as individuals and not as members of classes. This also corresponds to the preoccupation of middle class feminists. The organisation must be as *structureless and diffuse* as possible to ensure that discussion remains inconclusive. Only by preventing arguments reaching clear consequences can the consensus of sisterhood be preserved.

The fear that the artificial unity behind sisterhood will be exposed has meant that British feminists have been reluctant to call a national conference since 1978. The safest bet for feminists are small local groups where women can share each other's experiences. This instinct of self-preservation leads Coote and Campbell to admit that the survival of the feminist movement has been closely related to its organisational structure.¹²

The differences between communism and feminism are most clearly revealed on questions of organisation. This is not surprising as important political differences often find their most tangible expression in organisational forms. We have already noted the convergence of feminism and the radical left in their common critique of 'deterministic' Marxism. The same convergence also manifests itself in a hostility towards the Leninist party. The socialist feminist bestseller *Beyond the fragments* provides a systematic presentation of feminist organisation and a rejection of the Leninist party.

The hostility of feminists and the radical left towards the Leninist form of organisation is not primarily a theoretical one. It is more the fear of the middle class radical for his or her individuality. One of the co-authors – Sheila Rowbotham – expresses this anxiety well:

'If you accept a high degree of centralisation and define yourselves as professionals concentrating above everything upon the central task of seizing power, you necessarily diminish the development of the self-activity and self-confidence of most of the people involved. Because, for the women's movement, the development of this confidence and ability to be responsible for our lives was felt to be a priority, this became part of the very making of a movement.'¹³

It is worth examining this statement in detail because of its admirably succinct presentation of the issues at stake.

The objective of a revolutionary party is to seize power from the capitalist class. This is not Rowbotham's objective. Her 'priority' is the development of 'confidence and ability to be responsible for our lives'. According to Rowbotham these two priorities conflict. *Hence the form of organisation she advocates reflects the objective of achieving confidence.* The organisational differences are secondary, but they flow from the different goals of individual development and the overthrow of the state.

Rowbotham's intuition is correct. Revolutionaries subordinate individual preoccupations to their objective. Feminist organisation, on the other hand, emphasises the individual participant and considers political issues from the point of view of the effects on their members. This form of organisation caters primarily for the internal needs of its supporters. The revolutionary party on the other hand considers its supporters only insofar as it is concerned about its ability to relate to the outside world. The Leninist party is not concerned about catering for internal needs as such, its aim is to give a lead in the class struggle. The feminist hostility to leadership stems from its preoccupation with individual fulfilment and with its limited aims. On the other hand, a preoccupation with giving a

lead denies the importance of individual experience as such, and forces revolutionaries to combat their individualism.

It is ironic that Rowbotham blames the objective of seizing power for 'diminishing' the development of individuals. In reality the revolutionary party depends on developing the consciousness of its members to be an effective force. In fact the denial of 'self-activity' and 'self-confidence' cannot be attributed to the activities of any one party. It is capitalist social relations that generate atomisation and individual insecurity. The fact that Rowbotham pins the blame on the only force — a revolutionary party — that can effectively destroy the barriers to individual development only confirms the myopia of feminist politics.

The hostility of socialist feminists towards the Leninist form of organisation is not surprising. Revolutionary discipline represents the very negation of sisterhood. Often socialist feminists react against the Leninist form of organisation even before they are conscious of their rejection of the objectives of Leninism. Thus Karen Margolis in her 'confessions of an ex-Trotskyist' recalls that being in the International Marxist Group (hardly noted for its high organisational standards) was 'rather like school'. What Margolis is really objecting to is that she didn't like being told what to do: 'By late 1978, I had concluded that what was wrong with the IMG was not its lack of feminism but its adherence to the rigid traditions of revolutionary organisation'.¹⁴ Fortunately the 'confessions' end on a happy note. Margolis discovers that 'organising can be fun'. She is certain this is so because the 'archives of photos documenting women on demonstrations and picket lines attest to this; happy, smiling faces, laughing though the aim is serious'.¹⁵

Of course this attack on the Leninist party is not unique to feminism. Much of the radical left believes organisation should be more human and pride of place is given to the 'non-aligned' — the radical petit-bourgeois version of the rugged individual. It is interesting to note that many autonomous feminists and non-aligned males have found a haven in an organisation which is the most anti-democratic of all working class institutions: the Labour Party.

Separatism

We have drawn attention to the essential similarities between feminism and other forms of radical middle class politics. This is because we think that the 'anti-men' and separatist dimensions of feminism which are often objects of criticism by non-feminists and even by feminists themselves are incidental and of secondary importance for understanding the evolution of the women's movement.

Separatist and anti-men attitudes simply carry the logic of feminism to absurd conclusions. Most feminists have been reluctant to draw out these conclusions. A paper given by Beby Ettore to the 1976 Women's Liberation Movement Conference in Newcastle illustrates this fear of going all the way. Ettore defines autonomy as 'self-definition (on the individual level) and the development of a separate power base from men (on the political level)'.¹⁶ Separatism 'takes the establishment of a separate power base issue (which is the strategy of autonomy) to its ultimate end, that is, in the establishment of the power of women to the total exclusion of men'.¹⁷ Ettore cannot show why those who support autonomy should not follow the logic to its separatist conclusions. She simply raises a problem for discussion. In fact feminists who argue against separatism rely on *pragmatism* rather than logic. Thus separatism is criticised on the grounds that it isolates women and that it deprives women of potential allies.

The debate between those who support autonomy and those who support separatism is not very important. The only significance of this discussion is that it exposes the charade of feminist organisation and of sisterhood. Radical women were not prepared to compromise with their more pragmatic sisters and major conflicts erupted inside many women's groups which destroyed the whole reason for existence of such organisations. Many have sought to blame the intolerance of radical lesbians towards their heterosexual sisters for the disintegration of sisterhood. This misses the basic point: feminist organisation cannot survive if serious differences of any sort are drawn out to their logical conclusions.

Campbell comes slightly closer to the truth:

'Apart from the conflict between socialist feminism and radical feminism within women's liberation, confidence in the autonomy of the movement cracked also because of the experience of the limits of consciousness raising on the one hand, and the sense of marginality in relation to political forces outside the movement on the other hand. Furthermore, the movement's internal practice celebrated a form of sisterhood, again through the medium of consciousness raising, which depended on common identification as the source of collective self-knowledge and the condition of collaboration — it didn't easily accommodate difference'.¹⁸

Campbell of course refuses to engage in a real critique of feminist organisation and ends on a typically inconclusive note of reviewing past experience 'with a view to constructing a new political space for personal life'.¹⁹

The crisis of feminist organisation precipitated by the autonomy/separatist debate has exposed the myth of sisterhood. It also reveals the narrow preoccupations of feminism. Sisterhood was not challenged by different political options regarding abortion rights, equal rights or the fight for nurseries. Wide social issues could be forgotten because what mattered was the politics of personal life.

Now we have examined the basic outlook of the modern women's movement, let's look at how it has evolved over the past 10 or 15 years.

British feminism 1964~1982

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) has gone through two phases. The first phase from the late 'sixties to the mid 'seventies corresponded to the last years of the long post-war boom: this was feminism in its radical experimental period. The second phase, from 1975 to today, took place during a time of deepening recession which destroyed the basis for middle class radicalism and strengthened conservative tendencies within feminism.

Women's liberation: phase I

The WLM in its early days was angry and dynamic. The radicalisation of the 'sixties led the movement to adopt programmes of far-reaching aims and militant tactics.

The WLM did not restrict itself to the objectives of formal equality. The four demands that were formulated at the first conference of the WLM in Oxford in 1970 touched upon the crucial manifestations of women's oppression:

- 1 Equal education and job opportunities
- 2 Equal pay
- 3 Free 24-hour nurseries
- 4 Free contraception and abortion on demand.

These demands accurately summarised some of the essential preconditions for the liberation of women. Many activists in the WLM at the time understood this. Unfortunately the WLM as such did not appreciate that such far-reaching demands could only be realised through the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system.

Another weakness of the WLM was its heterogeneous political outlook. Although many women were sympathetic to socialist objectives and open to the labour movement, there was a deep suspicion of working class

politics. Even in its most radical form, feminism represented a system of class alliances that rejected attempts to fight the oppression of women from a working class point of view. Consequently the important objectives of the WLM never became influential among working class women.

The only serious attempt to relate to working women, the Working Women's Charter, was more an alliance of sections of the WLM with the labour bureaucracy than a campaign to mobilise working women. The Charter, which was promoted by the London Trades Council in 1974 and consisted of a series of modest demands designed to improve the position of working women, never got very far. Although some left-wing feminists took up a campaign around the Charter, the WLM as such was not much interested in it. It was regarded with suspicion as 'too working class' or 'too economistic' or too involved with the left. In the end the only consequence of the campaign was to force the TUC bureaucrats to pass a few token resolutions.

There was a real contradiction between the formal objectives of the WLM, which could only be pursued from an anti-capitalist perspective, and its preoccupation with individual concerns. In 1970 there was still some potential for transforming at least a section of WLM into a serious campaign for the emancipation of women. But the weakness of the British revolutionary tradition ensured that 'personal politics' prevailed. The contradiction within the WLM was resolved by abandoning its four important demands in all but name.

Of course, the WLM never went through the motions of formally dropping its demands. All that happened was that the four demands assumed the character of a sacred scroll with no practical consequences. Except for episodic activity around the Charter and equal pay, all the important campaigns were around peripheral issues. The staple of consciousness raising and conferences and more conferences was complemented by protests against sexism — demos against the Miss World Competition and sticker campaigns against offensive adverts.

Some of these activities — for example the 1970 Miss World disruption — were imaginative and militant. But they tended to touch upon issues which were tangential to the structure of women's oppression. Excessive concern with symbols of degradation at the expense of problems that restricted the role of women in social life ensured that even in its radical phase the WLM would have an inward-looking character.

The early WLM established a militant, student image. But by the end of 1974 the radicalisation of the middle class was over and feminism slowly and unconsciously began to distance itself from its radical beginnings. The recession and the economic insecurity it generated brought a

halt to individual experimentation. Feminists were now forced to abandon their dreams of bliss through sisterhood and come to terms with more earthly matters.

Women's liberation: phase II

The National Abortion Campaign (NAC) launched in early 1975 was the most successful initiative of the feminist movement. NAC coordinated widespread resistance against attacks on abortion rights. Its crowning achievement came in October 1979 when it forced the TUC to organise a mass demonstration against the anti-abortion Bill introduced into Parliament by John Corrie. Yet NAC's success also marked the end of the radical phase of the WLM. NAC made feminism respectable in British politics. Through NAC the WLM made its peace first with Parliament, and then with the Labour Party. NAC allowed the WLM to re-orient itself in a reformist and moderate direction.

Before 1975 many feminists had rightly criticised the 1967 Abortion Act on the grounds that it was entirely inadequate for the needs of women. Poor facilities meant that for many working women, abortion was far from easily available. However, when the 1967 Act came under Parliamentary attack an important shift took place. The aim of NAC was restricted to *defending* the Act. And this was not an isolated event: there were other changes too. One of the original slogans of the WLM was: 'Free contraception and abortion on demand'. Supporters of NAC argued that this was a fine slogan, but it would alienate potential support, so NAC adopted as its campaigning slogan 'a woman's right to choose'. They argued, as it turned out correctly, that this slogan would have wide appeal both inside and outside Parliament.

Campaigning around the slogan 'free abortion on demand' advances the struggle for women's liberation. This slogan insists that abortion is a *social right* that must be made available to all women. It places the responsibility on society to make this right available: it thereby implies a change in the social position of women. The demand for the 'right to choose' is the very opposite — it does not imply that abortion is a social right. Instead it emphasises individual choice. Invoking the rights of the individual — a concept at the centre of bourgeois ideology — is a step towards the ruling class. It implies that what is at issue is an individual problem, not a social one. Further, the individual right to choose does not exist for women, especially working class women. For working class women, abortion is not a choice but a *necessity* and that is how it should be posed.

The NAC campaign did not mount any challenge to the prevailing consciousness of women or men. One NAC activist recalls how even

people *opposed* to women's right to abortion could support the campaign's nebulous slogan:

'Popular support for "A woman's right to choose" is clearly enormous. . . . Even anti-abortionists have signed on the grounds that while they themselves would never have an abortion they do not see why they should prevent others coming to their own decisions.'²⁰

We are not against building mass support. But NAC's appeals to bourgeois prejudice about freedom of choice could not defend women's rights. The 1967 Act still stands. And today working class women have neither a free choice nor easy access to abortion facilities.

NAC's style of politics reflected the 'maturing' of feminism. Public activity was directed towards lobbying and cultivating MPs. Public statements and activities drew attention to NAC's respectable and reasonable outlook. Doctors, lawyers, MPs and prominent personalities were mobilised for the cause. In NAC feminism moved through pressure group politics into a closer and closer embrace with the Labour Party.

The period of NAC's activism coincides with the convergence between feminism and reformism. The WLM moved into two new avenues – self-help social work and Labour Party politics. It is to these developments that we now turn.

Women's self-help

The recession, economic insecurity and social tension, forced the middle class, and the WLM with it, in a right-wing direction. Students, feminists and radical leftists cut their hair and cleaned up their image. Feminists in Britain began to talk less and less of social change and opted for piecemeal reforms. Many joined Labour Party-dominated campaigns and sought to feminise this reformist party. Others began to organise against male violence against women. Indeed, the most important activities in recent years have been around the issues of battered women, rape and 'reclaiming the night'. Women's refuges in particular have received considerable public support, and according to Coote and Campbell this 'has been the most productive of all campaigns within the women's liberation movement'.²¹

The systematic violence that women experience stems from their inferior position in society. Women's lives are violated by social relations which force them into the roles of domestic servants. Women's limited participation in the life of society means that most women lead an atomised and fragmented existence. Women are unequal in all aspects of social life – they thus become the natural victims of capitalist society and in its

most privatised corners suffer its most vicious barbarities. It follows that violence against women can be overcome only if the social relations that enslave them are eliminated.

Feminist campaigns against male violence restrict their targets to the most extreme manifestations of violence against women – the rapist or the wife beater. They concentrate on the individuals who perpetrate these acts in isolation from the social forces that condition such brutal behaviour. Violence against women must be fought, not in a piecemeal way, but in the context of a social struggle against the system. But we must get our priorities right. A campaign against male violence is useless without a struggle to free women from domestic tyranny.

Without a struggle for the social emancipation of women, a campaign against male violence can easily strengthen bourgeois forces demanding more law and order. The bourgeoisie has no qualms about punishing individual criminals. Indeed, it can use cases such as that of the Yorkshire ripper to strengthen its case for more police and stricter law enforcement. It will be the working class that will suffer from more police harassment, and the most important violaters of women – the capitalist class – will get off scot free.

In fact violence against women can only be fought by mobilising the working class in defence of female emancipation. In this way the main force that has an interest in eliminating social oppression can take practical measures to isolate the individual perpetrators of violence. Feminists propose quite different solutions. Although most feminists are suspicious of the police and the courts, at the end of the day they look to the state. This is ironic, for the state exists to defend the *status quo*, to organise the exploitation of workers and the oppression of women.

The reformist character of the campaign against violence acquires its clearest expression in the organisation of women's refuges. Rather than forcing society to provide the resources necessary for the economic independence of every woman, feminists have become social workers. In itself, there is nothing wrong with organising housing and protection for battered women. But there is everything wrong with organising in this sphere as part of the soft arm of the state. And that's what refuges have become.

Feminists working in refuges of course emphasise the 'autonomy' of individual groups. They may be autonomous from working women but they are certainly not autonomous from the state. The Women's Aid Federation is an umbrella organisation for many local groups. In the financial year 1980-81 it received a grant of £96 000 from the DHSS.²² This money cannot be used for local refuges. Local refuges are the respon-

sibility of local authorities: most of the properties in which refuges are situated are rented from the council.²³ This makes a lot of sense for local politicians as it is a cheap way of meeting their obligations under the homelessness legislation. Refuges are the cheapest form of accommodation available to local authorities. The bourgeois state is quite prepared to assist Women's Aid. It is an effective way of rationalising services while retaining an aura of progressive concern. This is the sort of 'autonomy' the DHSS enjoys.

Feminists call their parastatal activities 'welfare control'. Their aim is to use the bourgeois state for progressive ends. This is how Rowbotham explains this orientation:

'With the active support of working class people in a community, mutual self-help forms provide a potential means of distinguishing between the coercive aspects of the state machinery and those activities of the state which are necessary to people in their everyday life. They raise the possibility of welfare control.'²⁴

'Self-help' and 'community support' are simply means of allowing the ruling class to provide less services for less money. Women's refuges have the added advantage that they integrate potential troublemakers into the state machinery. The intimate connection between self-help and the British state reveals much about the content of feminist politics. It shows that not only is feminism reformist – but that it is a form of reformism that actually helps the running of the state machinery. The WLM used to be called subversive; today it has become one large quango.²⁵

And finally the Labour Party

'What impressed me was how honestly women spoke from their own experience.' A description of another WLM workshop? No. It's Jill Nichols of *Spare Rib* reporting on the June 1977 Labour Women's Conference.²⁶ Since that time feminists have turned in increasing numbers towards the Labour Party. *Sweet freedom*, probably the most influential British feminist text written recently barely conceals its object:

'We must seek to wield power ourselves – as feminists. . . . This is the logical extension of the feminist-based campaigns for positive action. It is beginning to happen in the Labour Party, where there is a strong feminist drive to achieve fuller participation for women – an expression not of ruthless careerism, but of a will to transform Labour politics.'²⁷

Feminists seem to be very selective about which male-dominated institutions they oppose. In fact there is no mystery. Like the rest of the radical

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left, feminists have 'grown up'. If you are into reforms why not join a party that has turned reforming into an art?

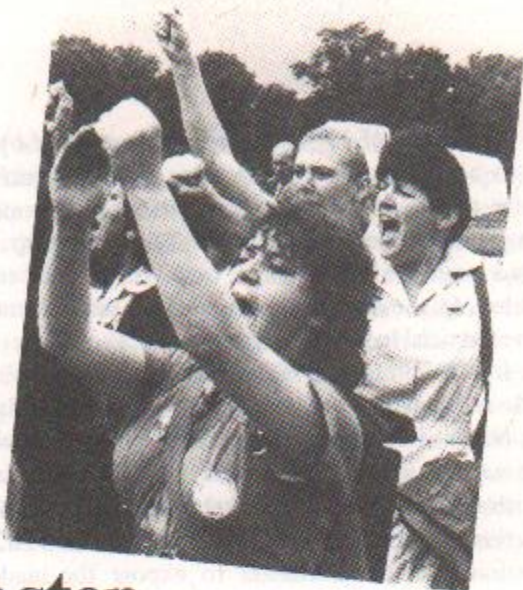
But what has the Labour Party done for women? 'Not much' say most feminists — 'but if it becomes more democratic it will become more responsive to the needs of women'. *Women's right to work*, published by the Labour Party in early 1982, makes a lot of promises. The title of the pamphlet suggests that women have the right to work. But the Labour leadership has already admitted that it will not be able to eliminate unemployment for a long time after it forms the next government. Because the Labour Party wants to live with the capitalist system it cannot guarantee work to anyone — men or women! Thus *Women's right to work* tries to side-step the issue by talking about 'earlier retirement' and 'increased emphasis on leisure services'. It states vacuously that 'we must challenge the accepted definition of work'.²⁸ But work is work. For working women it is a question of survival, not an academic problem of definition. The right to 'leisure services' means nothing if you have no job.

Feminists point out that at least the Labour Party supports 'positive action'. 'Positive action' is the biggest con-trick of all. After a decade of 'affirmative action' in the United States women are worse off than ever before. The only discrimination that can exist under capitalism is against women, blacks or gays. To imagine that a system based on systematic discrimination against the majority of society will begin to discriminate on behalf of its victims and against itself is absurd. 'Positive action' can be nothing more than a system of token gestures as long as women are forced to continue their roles as domestic slaves.

The Labour Party may have become more 'feminist'. After all, many party activists share the same social background and the same preoccupations as feminists. All that this means is that the party has become more effective in mobilising electoral support among women.

The convergence of feminism with the state and the Labour Party shows that the WLM has no independent political existence. Individuals can go on discussing how the personal is political inside women's refuges or in Labour Party wards. This only goes to show that *feminism* cannot even fight on the issues that it has staked out for itself.

Chapter 7



The next step

Both the labour movement and the women's movement have proved ineffective in the fight for women's rights. The trade union leadership seems more interested in recruiting women and keeping them under its control than in fighting sex discrimination. At the best of times the TUC ignores the specific oppression of women and campaigns for its female members simply as disadvantaged workers. Feminists, on the other hand, treat the fight for women's rights as a fight that stands above class relations, unconnected to the struggle against capitalism. Both movements provide a partial response to the problem and in the end both prove divisive. The trade unions not only mirror the sexual division imposed on the working class, they are often complicit in preserving it. Feminism takes this division for granted and makes it the foundation of a strategy for improving the position of women.

Neither the bureaucrats nor the feminists can carry the struggle further. We need a new kind of movement that projects the fight for liberation into the centre of the anti-capitalist struggle. Fragmented responses to the oppression of women can only be overcome through forcing the working class to assume its responsibility for this fight. In this sense, a key activity for the new movement of women is the struggle to transform the narrow and often chauvinist outlook of male workers. This cannot be done by obliterating the distinctive character of women's oppression through abstract calls for class unity. The struggle for women's liberation must be pursued relentlessly, but in a way that will force workers to realise that their real class interests lie in being in the forefront of the campaign for female emancipation.

At the end of 1981 we convened a series of open meetings in Manchester to begin developing a working class approach to women's liberation. Under the auspices of the Revolutionary Communist Party, a discussion group called Women for Communism was set up. We undertook a concentrated period of theoretical work and produced a series of discussion articles. At the same time we participated in a number of activities which proved crucial in developing our political outlook.

In the spring of 1982, we fought for the jobs of 60 women workers made redundant by their company in nearby Runcorn. We took part in the National Health Service dispute which involved a majority of low-paid women workers in summer 1982. We organised against the attack on abortion rights when the state sought to restrict the grounds on which abortion could be carried out. In September 1982 we circulated a survey questionnaire in Manchester to expose the inadequate state of nursery provision. In October 1982, we challenged the implementation of the Rayner Report which forced women to make their own childcare arrangement before being allowed to sign on as available for work. We also took part in campaigns of black women to remain in Britain — specifically Parveen Khan, Manjit Kaur and Afia Begum.

Every one of our experiences revealed that the central issue was that of women's right to work. Redundancies, cuts, low pay, lack of nursery and abortion facilities and racial discrimination all undermine *the full participation of women in social production, in social life*. It became clear that a campaign for a woman's right to work would avoid the fragmented responses of past campaigns which have dealt with different manifestations of women's oppression as a series of single issues.

The objective of *Real freedom* is to outline the arguments and the objectives for the Women's Right to Work Campaign. The demand for the 'reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry' which Engels formulated in 1884 is still relevant 100 years later. The barrier to the realisation of this demand is the oppression of women within the economic unit of the family; the precondition for its fulfilment is the abolition of privatised domestic toil. Even in periods of capitalist expansion, when women are drawn into production in increasing numbers, they are given no *right* to work. Their participation is conditional on their individual ability to combine their twin tasks — at work and at home. When capital accumulation falters and women are thrown out of their jobs, they face a special problem, one which is generally regarded as less serious than that faced by male workers. To transform this outlook, it is crucial to campaign *specifically* for women's right to work.

Our starting point is the fight against all redundancies because today

wage labour is the only way in which workers' need to live can be expressed. The inability of the employers to provide the right to be exploited in no way reduces workers' need for a livelihood. We cannot accept the logic which says that workers must suffer if a particular employer cannot provide them with a job. The popular view which sees female unemployment as secondary to that of male workers makes the fight against redundancies that much more difficult to wage. Official statistics hide the real character and extent of female unemployment. In reality, every woman between the age of 16 and 60 who is not in full-time work is unemployed. Part-time work is only a means for the systematic exploitation of women without the capitalist having to undertake the cost of expanding the labour force. Women who are not involved in social production are defined as not available for full-time work rather than what they really are — unemployed.

The problem of women's unemployment is vastly underestimated by the state, the unions, the press and by women themselves. In campaigning for a woman's *right* to work, it is crucial that we challenge the attitude that women's unemployment is not a serious social or individual problem. Because women's time can be absorbed in the isolated domestic sphere, neither the unions nor employers are concerned about the waste of human resources it implies. When youth or skilled workers are unemployed both sides of industry worry about civil disorder, the waste of skills, loss of pride and self respect. But women have a home to go to and a 'job' of sorts to get on with.

The problem, however, goes deeper than this. Often the jobs women take on outside the home are badly paid and part-time. When these jobs are lost, it is not considered to be such a tragedy as when steel mills or car factories, docks or mines are shut down. Often unions claim that they have resisted *all* redundancies; they simply do not count the part-time jobs they have allowed the employer to cut.

During the 1982 NHS dispute, women made up the bulk of the militants. Many workers — from physiotherapists to ancillary workers — said that they would welcome more male employees in the NHS as this would help raise wages for everyone. Many women understandably pointed to the difficulties they faced in participating fully in extended strikes and occupations. Lengthy strikes are difficult for low-paid workers with responsibility for a home and family. Mothers in particular are continually thwarted from going on picket lines, travelling overnight or even going to evening branch meetings. When limited creche facilities were organised by hospital workers in Manchester active participation of women strikers increased dramatically. It's no wonder that when we linked the

NHS dispute to the right of women to work in our address to a rally in Tameside, Manchester, we were greeted with cheers by the health workers.

We must fight low pay and part-time work. An index-linked minimum wage of £120 a week for all would be a step towards establishing the economic independence of women. But without adequate childcare facilities women will still not be able to go out to work with any degree of freedom. As long as childcare remains the responsibility of the individual family, the right to work for women will be restricted. The ruling class realises this. That's why the DHSS has cynically sought to prevent mothers who are not available for full-time work from signing on. Even though the percentage of claimants who fall into this category is small, this attack has a significant ideological effect. It forces individual mothers to find and pay for childcare at a time when neither the state nor the employers have any interest in footing the bill.

The questionnaire that we carried out during summer 1982 revealed that few women are able to make use of state or employer-provided facilities: the vast majority are forced to rely on husbands or friends and relatives. It also revealed that many preferred to look after their own children rather than put them in a nursery. Given the poor quality of most of the cheaper nurseries and child-minding facilities, and the widely accepted view that mothers should remain with their own children, this view is not surprising. The attack on abortion facilities as a result of the cuts, and also through legal changes, is another restriction on women's right to work. The increasing privatisation of abortion facilities, paralleling the privatisation of nurseries, ensures that women have to pay out again and again if they are to have any chance of remaining in the job market. Our call for free abortion on demand emphasises two things: that the state, not individual women, must pay for facilities, and that facilities must be extensive enough to supply abortion on demand. We do not believe the 1967 Act in any way provided abortion on demand. This is not only because NHS provision has always only supplied about half the demand, but because it puts the 'choice' about abortion in the hands of the medical profession.

The main barriers to women's full participation in social production are therefore these: mass unemployment, the cuts and the lack of abortion and childcare facilities. It appears, however, that one of the major problems facing women workers is in fact the attitude of employers. The energies of the women's liberation movement and the TUC have as a result centred on how to convince bosses to supply more 'job opportunities' for women. Positive discrimination, equal opportunities clauses, adverts featuring pictures of women and training personnel managers to eliminate sexist

bias have all been put forward in an attempt to make the job market more open. But these suggestions just scratch the surface, reflecting as they do the concern of middle class women for superficial equality. The decline in the number of jobs, the marked segregation of the labour market, but most of all the oppression of women by capital which makes them differentially suited for certain roles in the economy, make these solutions illusory.

In a number of instances employers have positively discriminated in favour of blacks and women. Liverpool shops (eg Marks and Spencer) found that putting more black women on the tills increased their sales in the black community. And a printing firm in Leeds found that by taking more women on, they reduced labour turnover and kept wages down. The benefits of these measures have largely been for the capitalists.

We reject 'positive discrimination' because it is a divisive, token gesture, not because we think women should be treated equally when they are socially unequal. This inequality is created and recreated in the working class by capital. Special measures such as nursery facilities, training courses, protective legislation, maternity rights, abortion facilities, etc are all essential if women are to have a chance to participate on equal terms. *Special measures* are necessary because women are *specifically* oppressed. Anything which the working class can win to improve women's position, lessen their additional burdens or enable them to compete more effectively for jobs must be encouraged. But we must be certain to ensure that any improvement we win is paid for by the capitalist class, the class which organises and benefits from women's oppression. We reject all solutions which ask the working class to pay for an improvement in women's position, by sacrificing their jobs, hours or facilities so women can have a bigger slice of a shrinking working class cake.

Our programme for action for a woman's right to work is straightforward:

- 1 Opposition to all redundancies
- 2 Opposition to all cuts in social services
- 3 For free 24-hour nurseries
- 4 For free abortion on demand
- 5 Against all forms of discrimination (cohabitation rules, Nationality Act rules) which deny women access to social services, jobs and civil rights.

A campaign around these objectives provides an immediate defence of women. At the same time activities around these aims can relate to the aspirations of all workers for a better life. This programme can provide the basis for a struggle which will not be at the expense of anyone other

than the capitalist class — and thus provide the foundations for unity between male and female workers. The struggle for a woman's right to work challenges the existing social system. It can only be realised fully in a communist society when childcare and other private chores become part of social production and real social services. But every blow struck today to keep a nursery open, to hold union meetings during hours of work, for pro rata wage rates for part-timers or against the legal discrimination of women will bring real freedom that much closer. Join us in the fight for a new world!

Footnotes

Chapter I

- 1 *Department of Employment Gazette*, February 1970, Table 110; February 1982, Table 2.6.
- 2 *Morning Star*, 22 August 1981.
- 3 *Equal Opportunities Commission Fifth Annual Report*, 1980, p69.
- 4 C Hakim, *Occupational segregation*, Department of Employment research paper, No 9, November 1979.
- 5 *Department of Employment Gazette*, January 1982.
- 6 Annual average rates of female unemployment, 1976-81:

1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
3.4%	4.2%	4.3%	4.2%	5.5%	7.8%

Source: *Department of Employment Gazette*, *ibid*, from Table 2.1, pS23.

- 7 Part-time female employment (000s):

	Production industries	Service industries	Total
Sept 1980	471.9	3138.9	3643
June 1981	427.5	3100.1	3558
Sept 1981	410.5	3045.3	3496

Source: *Department of Employment Gazette*, *ibid*, from Table 1.4, pS11.

- 8 *Ibid*, Table 1.1, pS7.
- 9 *Financial Times*, 27 March 1982.
- 10 Treasury, *Economic Progress Report*, No 143, March 1982, p10.
- 11 *Ibid*.
- 12 *Financial Times*, 5 March 1982.

13 *Financial Times*, 19 March 1982.

14 Increase in average gross weekly earnings, 1978-81 (%):

	Manual men	Manual women	Non-manual men	Non-manual women
Private sector	48.1	48.8	57.6	62.0
Public sector	56.7	55.8	65.8	64.5

Source: *Incomes Data Services Quarterly*, February 1982, p9.

15 *New Earnings Survey 1981*, Department of Employment, April 1981.

16 Ibid.

17 S McCowan, *Widening horizons: women and the Conservative Party*, Conservative political centre pamphlet, 1975, p12.

18 *The Economist*, 20 February 1982.

19 Occupational distribution of male and female employees (UK), 1971 (%):

	Male	Female
Professional & technical	10.8	11.7
Administrative & managerial	5.3	0.8
Clerical workers	11.2	29.5
Sales workers	7.4	11.6
Agricultural workers	4.0	1.1
Production workers	52.3	18.7
Armed forces	1.8	4.1
Others	1.5	0.1
Service workers	5.7	22.3
	100.0	100.0

Source: *Yearbook of labour statistics*, 1978, Table 2B.

20 'If it's women it doesn't matter much', in J West, ed, *Women, work and the labour movement*, RKP, 1982, p28.

21 *Fletcher vs Clay Cross*, cited in M Snell, 'The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts: their impact in the workplace', *Feminist Review*, No1, 1979, p57.

22 *Albion Shipping vs Arnold*, 1981, IRLR 520, in *Incomes Data Services Quarterly*, December 1981, p12.

23 *Daily Star*, 12 May 1980.

24 *Daily Express*, 4 December 1980.

25 See page 12.

26 *Financial Times*, 18 February 1982:

	'Poor family' net wages (£)	Unemployment benefit net (£)
1978	60.73	57.33
1980	86.25	78.18
1982 (est)	105.61	84.06

- 27 *The Times*, 24 January 1982.
- 28 *The Guardian*, 23 March 1982.
- 29 R Simpson, *Day-care for school age children*, EOC, 1978, p4.
- 30 *EOC Fifth Annual Report*, 1980, p75, and *DHSS Social Security Statistics*, 1981, Table 34.82.
- 31 *Morning Star*, 17 February 1982.
- 32 *The Guardian*, 28 July 1981.
- 33 *The Times*, 13 May 1981.
- 34 *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1982.
- 35 House of Commons written reply, 6 August 1980.
- 36 Beveridge Report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, HMSO, 1942.
- 37 *EEC Directive 79/7*, 'Equal treatment of men and women in matters of Social Security', December 1978.
- 38 'Because I could turn a tap whilst propping myself up and because I could go up and down stairs on my knees... I did not get a pension.' *Behind closed doors*, EOC pamphlet, December 1981, p6. See also *The experience of caring for elderly and handicapped dependents*, EOC survey report, March 1980.
- 39 *Personnel Management*, October 1981, p17.
- 40 *Social Trends*, HMSO, 1982, p229.
- 41 'The responsibility of local... authorities should continue to be limited to arranging for the day-care of children who, from a health point of view or because of deprived or inadequate background, have special needs that cannot otherwise be met.' Ministry of Health circular 37/68, cited in *Work and the family*, Equal Pay and Opportunity Campaign pamphlet, September 1978.
- 42 Private nursery places in Great Britain (full and part day), 1949-78:

1949	6893
1955	11 296
1960	14 595
1965	55 543
1970	248 883
1976	396 000
1978	414 000

Source: 1949-70 Tizard, Moss and Perry, *All our children*, Temple Smith/New Society, 1976; 1978 *Social Trends*, HMSO, 1981, Table 3.4.

- 43 *Social Trends*, *ibid*.
- 44 Tizard, Moss and Perry, *op cit*, and *Social Trends*, *ibid*.
- 45 *Social Trends*, HMSO, 1982, chart 13.4.
- 46 *Ibid*, p229.
- 47 *Department of Education and Science Statistical Bulletin*, April 1981.
- 48 *Ibid*, Table A.
- 49 *Ibid*.
- 50 Association of Directors of Social Services Questionnaire, February 1980. Cited in T Snow, *Services for old age: a growing crisis in London*, Age Concern research publications, May 1981.
- 51 H Swift, 'Not the doctor either', *the next step*, No 21, February 1982.

- 52 *Office of Population Censuses and Surveys Monitor*, 23 March 1982, Table 1.
- 53 *OPCS Monitor*, October 1981.
- 54 *Daily Mirror*, 16 September 1981.
- 55 *The Guardian*, 27 July 1982.
- 56 *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 1982.
- 57 *Daily Star*, 25 June 1980.
- 58 *Daily Mail*, 2 February 1980.
- 59 *The Times*, 9 May 1981.
- 60 *The Guardian*, 9 September 1979.

Chapter 2

- 1 *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 1982.
- 2 K Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Lawrence & Wishart, 1974 (all references to *Capital* are to this edition), p166.

Chapter 3

- 1 E Boulting, 'Familial constraints on women's work roles', in M Blaxall and B Reagan, *Women and the workplace*, University of Chicago Press, 1976, p112.
- 2 H Land, *Parity begins at home*, EOC/SSRC, 1981, p7.
- 3 J W Scott and L A Tilley, 'Women's work and the family in nineteenth century Europe', in A Amsden, ed, *The economics of women and work*, Penguin, 1980, p94.
- 4 S Boston, *Women workers and the trade unions*, Davis-Poynter, 1980, p74.
- 5 V Ellis, *The role of trade unions in the promotion of equal opportunity*, EOC/SSRC, 1981, p5.
- 6 General Household Survey, 1979, Table 5.3, p82.
- 7 *Department of Employment Gazette*, April 1981, Table 4, p171.
- 8 H Land, op cit, p3.
- 9 Department of Employment, *Women and work: a review*, 1976, p4.
- 10 *Capital*, Vol 1, p372. Most of the female operatives in the Lancashire cotton mills in 1833 were between the ages of 16 and 21. In 1841 only one quarter of the women cotton workers were married. See J W Scott and L A Tilley, op cit, p95.
- 11 *Capital*, Vol 1, p373. The employers did not shrink from also trying to force down the wages of women and even those of children: 'The same pressure that led to the employment of children presently leads in a slack time to the acceptance of yet lower pay for the sake of securing work. . . Thus, by and by, women and children come to receive no more than the mother working alone. The employer. . . has in fact obtained the labour of the children without extra payment'. Black, *Sweated industry and the minimum wage*, Duckworth, 1907, p148.
- 12 Between 1911 and 1971 women's share of skilled manual work dropped from 24 to 13.5 per cent. During that period women's share of unskilled manual work rose from 15.5 to 37.2 per cent.

- 13 Association of Teachers in Technical Institutions, *The education, training and employment of women and girls*, October 1973, p10. This pamphlet shows that the proportion of women in skilled work is dropping; the proportion in jobs likely to disappear as a result of the introduction of new technology is increasing.
- 14 E Bird, *Information technology in the office: the impact on women's jobs*, EOC, September 1980.
- 15 J West, 'New technology and women's office work', in J West, op cit.
- 16 W R Atkinson, 'The employment consequences of computers', in T Forester, ed, *The microelectronics revolution*, Blackwell, 1980, p348.
- 17 A Amsden, op cit, p4.
- 18 F Engels, *Origins of the family, private property and the state*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1972, pp137-8.
- 19 A Amsden, op cit, p144.
- 20 The social security office is probably the only place a man can get a 'family wage'. Apart from child benefits, all payments for the family are made to the head of the household.
- 21 A Hunt (*Women and work*, HMSO, 1965) found that over two-thirds of wives of manual workers gave 'needing the money' as the reason to return to work. And Peter Moss quotes a 1974 OPCS survey which found that 27 per cent of non-employed mothers said they would prefer to work. P Moss, *Alternative models of group childcare for pre-school children with working parents*, EOC, September 1978, p5.
- 22 'Although female breadwinners are a minority there were out of 11 million couples with husbands under 65, nearly seven million working wives, contributing an average 25 per cent to the family budget.' L Hamill, *Wives as sole and joint breadwinners*, Economic Advisers Office, DHSS, November 1978, pi.
- 23 'However badly women's work is paid - in 1979 working wives earned an average £41 a week, compared to £97 for "heads of households" - the loss of this so-called pin money pulls many families below the poverty line.' *Women in the 'eighties*, Counter Information Services, 1981, p4.
- 24 'As Rita Liljestrom wrote in a study commissioned in 1976 by the Advisory Council to the Swedish Prime Minister on equality between men and women: "Since the men's value system dominates, the women's culture is pushed to one side and rendered invisible: it takes on the character of an aberration that is to be rectified in the name of equality. It ceases to be a source of self-esteem and solidarity between women".' H Land, op cit, p25.
- 25 *EOC Research Bulletin*, Vol 1, No 3, Spring 1980, p25.
- 26 'Under no circumstances has the reserve of employable women been fully mobilised. Thus, it is almost impossible for a women's occupation to be effectively monopolised by the incumbents. Any occupation with a large proportion of female workers is vulnerable. In the economists' language, the elasticity of supply is very great.' T Caplow, *The sociology of work*, McGraw Hill, London, 1954, pp235-6.
- 27 On the reserve army of labour, see 'The recession: capitalist offensive and the working class', *Revolutionary Communist Papers*, No 3, July 1978, pp16-18.
- 28 Donovan Report, *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations 1965-68*, HMSO, June 1968.
- 29 The Fawcett Society, *Half a whole: women's contemporary role in work and*

- society. Speeches from a conference held on 3 May 1969, p151.
- 30 Catering, teaching, nursing and cleaning were protected from the full impact of the recession initially, while cuts in capital spending were pushed through. See T Allen, 'The world in recession', in *Revolutionary Communist Papers*, No 7, July 1981, p17. And as Breugal says: 'If women had not been concentrated in women's work... but had been distributed amongst industries in the same way as men, then the impact of the 1974-77 crisis would have been far greater - a decline of jobs of almost half a million, compared to an actual increase in the period of 140 000'. I Breugal, *Feminist Review*, No 3, 1980, p16.
 - 31 Approximately 45 per cent of unemployed women, and only 24 per cent of unemployed men fail to register.
 - 32 In December 1980 the 'discharge' rate in manufacturing industries was larger for women (2.1 per 100 employed) than for men (1.6 per 100 employed). *Department of Employment Gazette*, February 1981, Table 1.6. The *New Earnings Survey*, 1971, Table 132, shows that only in one occupational group - 'catering, domestic and other service staff' - was job stability, measured in terms of the numbers employed with their current employer for more than one year, greater for women than for men.
 - 33 *Capital*, Vol 1, p648.
 - 34 GMWU, *February 1981 - a red letter month for homeworkers*, p2, lists 'sewing buttons onto cards, screws in electric plugs, pregnancy testing, painting and assembling toys, jewellery making, knitting, lace-making, Airfix sports products, glove making, typing and addressing envelopes, football scarf tasselling, Christmas crackers, assembly of small electrical goods, sections of the rag trade'.
 - 35 Although most homeworkers are mothers looking after young children with no access to childcare facilities, homeworkers include disabled and old people, or women looking after disabled or elderly relatives, ethnic minorities who can't speak English, cannot for cultural reasons go out to work or who are 'illegal' immigrants, and people who live too far from a workplace, in rural areas.
 - 36 'Nearly half of the homeworkers earned less than 40p an hour and two-thirds under 60p. Only one in six earned over £1 (the average hourly earnings of the poorest 10 per cent of all female manual workers).' Review of the Low Pay Unit report, *The hidden army*, in the *Morning Star*, 23 December 1979. The most comprehensive survey on homeworkers found 98 per cent were women, 88 per cent married, 10 per cent divorced/separated and two per cent widowed. Ninety eight per cent of them had children under the age of 16. A Cragg and T Dawson, *Qualitative research among homeworkers*, Department of Employment Research Paper, No 21, May 1981, pp1,6.
 - 37 P Townsend, *Poverty in the UK*, Allen Lane, London, 1979.
 - 38 A Cragg and T Dawson, op cit, p14.
 - 39 Ibid, p21.
 - 40 'A union might help. I don't really know. The work I do could be done in the factory... (If homeworkers got together and pressed for higher pay) they might just end up saying we can get it done in the factory.' (Manufacturer of mobiles, South East. Suffers from arthritis, earning 30p per hour.) Ibid, p25.
 - 41 Eurostat, *Labour force sample surveys*, 1975 and 1977, p40.
 - 42 'One the whole, part-time workers, other than domestic staff, are employed for one or two reasons: either because full-time labour is not available or else because of fluctuating demand.' V Klein, *Britain's married women workers*,

1965, p129. When this book was published only 15.9 per cent of working women were employed part-time by manufacturing industry. Although by 1970 there had been a slight increase – to 19.7 per cent – the massive increase in the employment of part-timers occurred in the service sector, reflected in the overall rise over the same period in all industries from 36.9 per cent to 46.9 per cent. Between 1971 and 1976 the number of female employees in part-time work increased by 30 per cent overall, but in manufacturing it only rose by 3.2 per cent.

- 43 See, for example, 'The three day week and how it works for Maureen Purbrook', *Over 21* magazine, June 1980. 'I work twice as hard as I ever did before. ... I waste much less time. ... No more long phone calls to friends, chit chats in the corridor and two hour lunches. In short, I'm more productive.' Or an interview with Sandra Edmeades, in charge of the Glasgow branch of the Alfred Marks Employment Agency: 'It is obviously cheaper for an office to bring in a temp for three days or a week at the end of the month when the workload is heavy than to keep a kid filing her nails for a large part of the time'. *Evening Times*, 14 May 1981, p8. Kay Sykes, founder of 'part-time careers', 'advises employers that often seemingly full-time jobs are, in fact potentially part-time ones, if you remove the periods of thumb twiddling'. *Company*, August 1981, p77.
- 44 J Hurstfield, *The part-time trap*, Low Pay Unit pamphlet, No 9, November 1978, p21.
- 45 *EOC Sixth Annual Report*, 1981, p 4, and *The Times*, 1 April 1981.
- 46 Full-time workers are affected by the length of service provision which allows redundancy pay after two years with the same employer, maternity pay and leave after two years, unfair dismissal claims after one year if the company is large, or two if it is small, a contract of employment after 13 weeks, notice payments on a scale, etc. Part-timers can only qualify for these rights if they work for 16 hours a week or more, or if they have worked for eight hours or more for the same employer for five years.
- 47 'The law excludes part-time workers from certain employment protection. ... (by) expressly excluding employees who work less than a specific number of hours a week from other rights – ie time off for union duties, training and membership activities.' *Employment Law Briefing*, No 10, IDS Brief 2231, February 1982, pi.
- 48 *Personnel Management*, June 1982, p29.
- 49 *Job-sharing: improving the quality and availability of part-time work*, EOC, July 1981, pp8-9.
- 50 *Working time – guidelines for managers*, CBI publications, May 1981, p10.
- 51 *Ibid*, pp8-9. Marx understood that the answers to these interesting questions would be to make the workers pay: 'Crises during which production is interrupted and the factories work "short time" ie for only a part of the week, naturally do not effect the tendency to extend the working day. The less business there is, the more profit has to be made on the business done, the less time spent in work, the more of that time has to be turned into surplus labour-time'. *Capital*, Vol 1, p231.
- 52 *Company*, op cit, p81.

Chapter 4

- 1 *EOC Research Bulletin*, op cit, p60. Of the EEC countries only France has comparatively widespread nursery provision – and a low incidence of part-time work, only 15.2 per cent of working women in 1977.
- 2 Tizard et al, op cit, p 58, and *DES Statistical Bulletin*, April 1981.
- 3 *EOC Research Bulletin*, op cit, p30.
- 4 Tizard et al, op cit, p142.
- 5 Ibid, p72.
- 6 Ibid, p88. The 1951 annual report of the Ministry of Health said that local authorities could only justify day nursery places 'where children in special need on health or social grounds were concerned', and not where the need 'arose from the mother's desire to supplement the family income'.
- 7 A Ministry of Health circular (37/68) includes as priorities mothers who are 'fathers' (breadwinners) in one-parent families, sick or hospitalised or who otherwise are 'unable to look after them adequately because they are incapable of giving young children the care they need'.
- 8 Tizard et al, op cit, p88.
- 9 One Chief Education Officer quoted in C Day, *Company day nurseries*, Institute of Personnel Management, 1975, p2, said: 'We are having to jettison everything we can to keep the ship afloat. Unfortunately nursery programmes are one of the most jettisonable'.
- 10 P Mottershead, *A survey of childcare for pre-school children with working parents: costs and organisation*, EOC, May 1978, p16.
- 11 Mottershead, op cit.
- 12 Lady Plowden, *Children and their primary schools*, Department of Education and Science, 1967.
- 13 Tizard et al, op cit, p142.
- 14 P Thayer 'Child-minding and day-care', presented to a conference of the Royal Society of Health, 11 March 1976.
- 15 M Bone, *Pre-school children and the need for daycare*, OPCS (social service division), HMSO, 1977, p15.
- 16 R Simpson, *Forward from Finer*, National Council for One-Parent Families, 1980, p14.
- 17 *I want to work...but what about the kids?*, EOC, 1978, pp20-21. The EOC accepts the need to economise on 'scarce resources', the basic rationale for the cuts: 'We recognise that the proposals that we are making will require considerable reallocation of scarce resources'. National Campaign for Nursery Education President Renee Short MP argues: 'Even if only from an economic point of view, we must get it right in the early stages'. *Morning Star*, 22 October 1975.
- 18 See C Freeman, 'The understanding employer', in J West, op cit, pp139-149.
- 19 J Coussins, *Maternity rights for working women*, NCCL, 1980, p14.
- 20 *Employment News*, No 76, August 1980.
- 21 W W Daniel, *Maternity rights: the experience of women*, Policy Studies Institute, June 1980.
- 22 *Labour Research*, April 1977, claims that about 821 000 women have worked part-time for less than five years and are therefore disqualified from claiming maternity pay.

- 23 *The Guardian*, 28 October 1980.
- 24 *The Times*, 28 October 1980.
- 25 *Hunts Post*, Huntingdon, 8 November 1980.
- 26 *Capital*, Vol 1, p285.
- 27 *Ibid*, p268.
- 28 Quoted in *ibid*, p267.
- 29 E Paterson, 'The position of working women, and how to improve it', in *Labour News*, April 1874, reprinted as an appendix in H Goldmann, *Emma Paterson*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1974, pp118-9. A century later middle class feminists echoed the same prejudices: 'The...most insulting anomaly is that women are in general considered equivalent to young persons and that, to rub salt in the wound, boys of 16, who have just left school, have often greater freedom – and less protection – than adult and experienced women workers'. *Protective legislation: who benefits – men or women?*, EOC, 28 October 1977, p3.
- 30 Quoted in N C Seldon, *Women in British trade unions 1874-1976*, Gill & Macmillan, p125. The ODC included Mrs Pethwick Lawrence, Vera Brittan and Lady Astor among its members.
- 31 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 16, pp29-32.
- 32 CBI, *Employing women: the employers' view*, September 1967, p5.
- 33 Foreword to *Hours of employment of women and young persons employed in factories*, A Report, HMSO, 1969.
- 34 The Equal Pay Act was passed by Parliament under a Tory government in 1970, but it was not fully implemented until 1975.
- 35 See Chapter 5 in this publication, p61.
- 36 *EOC Research Bulletin*, op cit, p11.
- 37 C Hakim, op cit.
- 38 'The main reason for the limited effectiveness of the EPA was the extensive job segregation in the organisations studied.' M Snell, P Glucklich and M Porall, *Equal pay and opportunities*, Department of Employment Research Paper, No 20, April 1981, p70. My emphasis.
- 39 'You could also look at the scope for segregation of men and women on completely different jobs so that comparisons cannot be made between them', advised management consultants P Paterson and M Armstrong in *An employers' guide to equal pay*, Kogan Page (Associates), 1972, p52. Sandra Grant, journalist on *The Sunday Times*, found, after some research of her own, that 'Firms which introduced disabled men into jobs previously done by women and then claim the rate of pay was for both sexes'. 30 December 1975.
- 40 *Financial Times*, 30 December 1975.
- 41 'The costs of meeting equal pay within the existing job and pay structure were considered by management to be prohibitive. With the acceptance of trade union representatives, who are concerned about male unemployment in the area, it is therefore now separating men and women into distinct categories of jobs.' Office of Manpower Economics, *Equal pay*, HMSO, 1972, p31.
- 42 G J Mephram, *Problems of equal pay*, Institute of Personnel Management, 1977, p42. Paterson and Armstrong pursue the same logic: 'The scope for improving the productivity of women should be reviewed. Areas can be selected for examination and studies made of current methods and standards. These should include consideration of clerical work measurement'. Op cit, p51. In other words the women in women-only jobs in the office could be subjected to the

- time and motion man on the pretext of equalising pay.
- 43 M Snell, 'The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts: their impact in the work-place', *Feminist Review*, No 1, 1979, p41.
 - 44 Snell concluded that: 'While most women...received substantial increases as a result of the Act, many received less than they might have done and there was considerable evidence that women were underpaid in relation to their skills and to the pay of comparable men'. Ibid, p35.
 - 45 P Paterson and M Armstrong, op cit, pp53-54.
 - 46 A Hunt, *Management attitudes and practices towards women at work*, OPCS, HMSO, 1975, p20.
 - 47 Ibid, p9.
 - 48 Anna Coote is still unable to drink at the bar at El Vino's, despite EOC backing for the case.
 - 49 *Financial Times*, 30 December 1975.
 - 50 Restricting ourselves to the figures for abortions carried out on British women gives a better view of the changes in abortion facilities, as the numbers of overseas women having abortions in Britain is affected by factors which are beyond the control of the British state, such as liberalisation of abortion legislation in Europe. Nevertheless, the state has ensured that aliens get little chance of 'scrounging' off the NHS. In the first quarter of 1981, 8737 legal abortions were carried out on 'non-residents' in England and Wales - only 57 of them on the NHS. *OPCS Monitor*, 23 March 1982.
 - 51 Introducing the Second Reading of his 1975 Abortion Amendment Bill in the House of Commons, James White said: 'I would have voted for the original Abortion Bill...Until such time as the "New Jerusalem" comes along with no bad housing, no poverty and no alcoholic husbands, I insist that abortion must be available for women with problems'. V Greenwood and J Young, *Abortion in demand*, Pluto, 1976, p44.
 - 52 The Executive of the Abortion Law Reform Association, the driving liberal force behind the passage of the 1967 Act, launched the Women's Right to Choose Campaign in 1975 in an effort to reform the law in women's interests. Their complaint was that the state insisted on discussing the question of abortion in a far broader context than necessary: 'We need to sweep away the old criminal laws and the complicated procedures under the 1967 Act. As far as possible we have to treat abortion like any other medical procedure. There would be nothing unlawful about having your appendix taken out by Mrs Jones next door'. *Abortion - the evidence*, Report from the Tribunal on Abortion Rights, NAC/NCCL, 1977, p13.

Chapter 5

- 1 A Lozovsky, *Resolutions of the First International Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions*, 1921.
- 2 C J Bundoche, *The story of the National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paper Workers*, OUP, 1959, p297.
- 3 Ibid, p69.

- 4 N C Soldon, *op cit*, p153.
- 5 B L Hutchins, *Women in modern industry*, Bell, London, 1915.
- 6 *Report of the 105th Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1973, p43.
- 7 S Lewenhak, *Women and the trade unions*, Benn, 1979, p185.
- 8 S Boston, *op cit*, p158.
- 9 *Report of the 64th Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1934, p237. NUPE in the present period has found that its militant image has helped in to recruit women.
- 10 N C Soldon, *op cit*, p167.
- 11 *Ibid*, p126.
- 12 Florence Hancock, a stalwart of the bureaucracy during and after the Second World War, typified this attitude in her reaction to a suggestion made at the 1941 Conference that male trade unionists should defend women's rights: 'I am not prepared to ask men to help women unless women are prepared to help themselves'. *Report of the 71st Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1941, p19.
- 13 In 1919, 5000 unemployed ex-servicemen demonstrated in Bristol against the employment of married women. Women who attempted to demonstrate in defence of their jobs attracted only catcalls and derisory labels such as 'flapper stunt'.
- 14 Typical of such pacts was that in the shipbuilding industry. Women were allowed into men's jobs on condition that men's rates were protected where they worked alongside women. Few women ever saw the 'rate for the job'. By referring to the clause which allowed women the full rate only as long as they could work 'without extra supervision or assistance', and dubbing all women as incompetents in need of constant care, the employers kept the unions happy and the women's wages down.
- 15 Labour's incomes policy was finally overturned at the 1950 TUC - ironically on the immediate issue of the introduction of equal pay in the public sector in defiance of the government's norms. Many of the 'left-wing' unions that opposed Labour's wage restraint had done nothing to uphold women's right to equal pay after the war. The miners persuaded the government to replace women working at the pithead with disabled workers. The engineers and foundry workers instituted women's sections to redefine the sexual division of labour in the industry. The electricians, too, established a women's section in place of the non-segregated units it had maintained since the First World War.
- 16 The white collar unions which led the campaign had little commitment to their women members. If women had to be civil servants, then the male workers wanted equal pay to protect their rates. But if the material conditions didn't justify recruiting women, then a strong body of opinion within the Civil Servants Clerical Association wanted them out. In 1952 and 1958, when rumours of redundancies were rife, motions calling for the reintroduction of a marriage bar were debated at the CSCA's conference. S Boston, *op cit*, p252.
- 17 'Time and again, although the allocation of job points proved conclusively that to the employer a woman's work was as valuable as that of a man, they were paid less. Hence their determination to stand out for "equal pay for work of equal value", and not just the "rate for the job".' S Lewenhak, *op cit*, p282.
- 18 S Boston, *op cit*, p281.
- 19 *Report of the 52nd Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1922, p70.
- 20 *Report of the 65th Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1933, p104.
- 21 N C Soldon, *op cit*, p142.

- 22 During the Second World War it was common for women to work shifts of 12 hours, in six hour stretches divided by a 15 minute break: 'It was like putting the clock back to the conditions prevalent in some of the worst enterprises before the 1937 Act. The unions acquiesced without too much fuss purely out of loyalty to the Government'. S Lewenhak, *op cit*, p245.
- 23 *Report of the 77th Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1947, p247.
- 24 The rejection of the Working Women's Charter was posed in terms of concern for women's health and safety. Joe Gormley of the NUM argued against it, 'saying that it called for equal opportunity of entry into occupation regardless of sex and he was determined that women should not work down the mines'. *The Guardian*, 29 August 1975. However he chose to express them, Gormley's sectional concerns were to limit the campaign within the narrowest possible framework.
- 25 NALGO used its new feminist image to boost membership: 'The National Equal Opportunities Committee, which produced the leaflet ['Sexual harassment is a trade union issue'], hopes that it can be used not only as a campaigning aid, but also as an aid to recruitment'. *NALGO News*, 26 March 1982.
- 26 *Women Workers' Bulletin*, TUC, 1981, p3.
- 27 'Equal opportunities for women: positive action programmes', *Report of the 113th Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1981.
- 28 *Spare Rib*, January 1981.
- 29 General Council Report, *Report of the 104th Annual Trades Union Congress*, 1972, p160.
- 30 *Women Workers: 1981*, Report of the TUC Women's Advisory Committee, TUC, 1981, p6.
- 31 *Women Workers' Bulletin*, *op cit*, p3.
- 32 *Morning Star*, 13 March 1979. Mary Maher, another NUJ member and MoC, writes in a similar vein: 'The women I've met through the trade union movement are among the most progressive feminists I know, with theories founded on practical experience [years ago]. Women in trade unions were discussing ways in which part-time work for both parents could be negotiated, how job-sharing could be successfully organised, whether shorter working days would be a better idea than shorter working weeks'. *Cosmopolitan*, August 1981.
- 33 *Morning Star*, 18 June 1968.
- 34 *Morning Star*, 28 June, 1968.
- 35 *Morning Star*, 1 July 1968.
- 36 *Morning Star*, 2 July 1968.
- 37 *Morning Star*, 5 July 1968.
- 38 *Morning Star*, 17 June 1968.
- 39 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 23 January 1970.
- 40 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 6 February 1970.
- 41 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 16 February 1970.
- 42 W Edmond and S Fleming, *All work and no play*, Falling Wall Press, 1975, p57.
- 43 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 25 February 1970.
- 44 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 6 March 1970.
- 45 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 March 1970.
- 46 W Edward and S Fleming, *op cit*.
- 47 Those who are up in arms about the recent 'Tory madness' of privatisation would do well to remember occasions such as this when, even before the effects

of the crisis proper were felt, the Labour Government was more than willing to throw women workers on to the dole in order to cut their cleaning costs by 30 per cent.

- 48 *The Times*, 21 August 1972.
- 49 A Low Pay Unit survey of 1977 found that a group of cleaners working in a highly-unionised firm were earning £1.11 per hour, whilst another group who remained non-unionised were paid only 48p per hour. *The brush-off*, Low Pay pamphlet No 5, February 1977, p23.
- 50 *New Statesman*, 4 August 1972.
- 51 *New Society*, 24 August 1972.
- 52 *Morning Star*, 12 August 1972.
- 53 W Edmond and S Fleming, op cit, p58.
- 54 *Financial Times*, 17 August 1976.
- 55 *The Sun*, 1 June 1976.
- 56 *Daily Express*, 19 August 1976.
- 57 *Financial Times*, 9 August 1976.
- 58 *Morning Star*, 9 August 1976.
- 59 *The Economist*, 23 October 1976. When Marie Paterson, then one of the two members of the TUC General Council who have to be women, was interviewed by *Spare Rib* during the dispute, her only comment on it was 'I've got enough to do without worrying about other people's strikes'.
- 60 Many of the male strikers were Asian students who, as temporary workers, shared many of the problems faced by women.
- 61 *Spare Rib*, August 1977.
- 62 J Rogaly, *Grunwick*, Penguin, 1977, pp55-56.
- 63 J Dromey and G Taylor, *Grunwick: the workers' story*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978, p52.
- 64 Quoted in J Rogaly, op cit, p67.
- 65 G Ward, *Fort Grunwick*, Temple Smith, 1977, p84.
- 66 J Dromey and G Taylor, op cit, p146.
- 67 *The Times*, 23 September 1977.
- 68 Quoted in J Dromey and G Taylor, op cit, p152.
- 69 *Ibid*, p188.
- 70 *For a few dollars more - Lee, the ultimate rip-off*, War on Want pamphlet, 1981. The radical left shared the union's criticisms of the company's motives for closure: 'Even by the company's standard there is no reason to close the Greenock factory except their desire for higher profit and "rationalisation". There is still a chart on the factory wall which shows Greenock as coming highest in the group for overall performance and meeting production targets'. *Women's Voice*, April 1981.
- 71 *Morning Star*, 4 March 1981.
- 72 *Morning Star*, 24 June 1981.
- 73 *Morning Star*, 29 July 1981.
- 74 *New Statesman*, 9 October 1981.
- 75 *Women's Voice*, November 1981.
- 76 *Women's Voice*, January 1981.
- 77 *Spare Rib*, January 1982.

Chapter 6

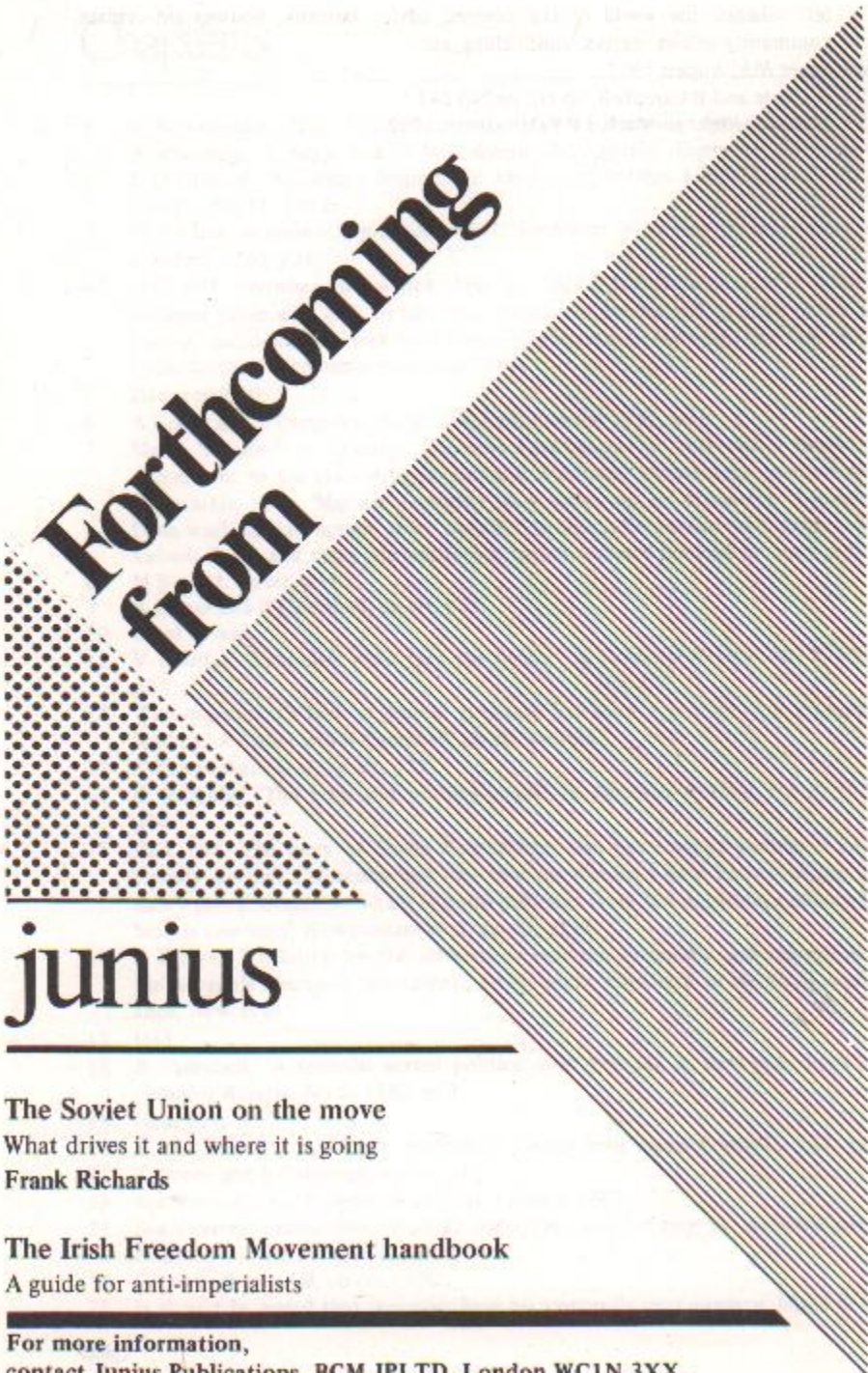
- 1 S Rowbotham, 'The women's movement and organising for socialism', in S Rowbotham, L. Segal and H Wainwright, *Beyond the fragments*, 1980, p40.
- 2 S O'Sullivan, 'Passionate beginnings: ideological politics 1969-72', in *Feminist Review*, No 11, 1982.
- 3 M Barrett, *Women's oppression today: problems in Marxist feminist analyses*, London, 1980, p24.
- 4 Ibid, p31. Elsewhere she writes 'there has been a fruitful alignment of interests between those who seek to raise the question of gender and its place in Marxist theory, and those who seek to challenge economism in Marxism, insisting on the importance of ideological processes', p85.
- 5 Ibid, pp39-40.
- 6 A Coote and B Campbell, *Sweet freedom*, London 1982, p22.
- 7 Many 'socialist' or 'Marxist' feminists have sought to maintain a degree of attachment to the class struggle. But this is entirely inconsistent on their part. Predictably most 'Marxist' feminists have ended up by distancing themselves from working class action. Most 'socialist' feminists have allied themselves to the Labour Party and many are vociferous in demanding a feminist incomes policy.
- 8 M Barrett, op cit, p44.
- 9 A Coote and B Campbell, op cit, p23.
- 10 Cited in ibid.
- 11 V Coultas, 'Feminists must face the future', in *Feminist Review*, No 7, 1981, p38.
- 12 'The movement's lack of formal structure has been a positive, not a negative feature.' A Coote and B Campbell, op cit, pp35-36.
- 13 S Rowbotham et al, op cit, p75.
- 14 K Margolis, 'The long and winding roads', in *Feminist Review*, No 5, 1980, p94.
- 15 Ibid, p95. The story of Sheila Rowbotham also has a happy ending: 'I know I really do feel a closeness and love towards women I have known within women's group situations which is quite different from the experience of socialist branch meetings'. Rowbotham et al, op cit, p134.
- 16 B Ettore, 'Workshop on the differences between autonomy and separatism in the women's liberation movement', 1976, paper submitted to the WLM conference, Newcastle.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 B Campbell, 'A feminist sexual politics: now you see it, now you don't', in *Feminist Review*, No 5, 1980, p13.
- 19 Ibid, p17.
- 20 S Himmelweit, 'Abortion: individual choice and social control', ibid, p65.
- 21 A Coote and B Campbell, op cit, p42.
- 22 See Women's Aid Federation circular, January 1981.
- 23 See *Leaving violent men: a study of refugees and housing for battered wives*, National Women's Aid Federation, 1981.
- 24 S Rowbotham et al, op cit, p137.
- 25 It should be noted that feminists have no monopoly over quangos. Much of the

left inhabits the world of law centres, advice bureaux, housing aid centres, community action centres, youth clubs, etc.

26 *Spare Rib*, August 1977.

27 A Coote and B Campbell, *op cit*, pp240-241.

28 *Women's Right to Work*, LP Publications, 1982.



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