

Women's Liberation

development of independent women's groups has proven to be a necessary and very progressive step. It has provided the vehicle for women to break from their traditional subordination. It has drawn into the struggle women who have had no previous political experience.

Within these groups, women are learning to become leaders, theoreticians, organizers; they are developing the abilities, learning the skills and gaining the experience that society has deprived them of. Within these organizations, women are achieving a dignity and confidence as human beings. These groups are, in fact, a training ground for the struggles ahead. Far from fostering divisions within the class, this process brings far more women to a consciousness about the oppressive nature of our system for themselves and for all people than would otherwise be possible.

HOW WILL THE MOVEMENT BE BUILT?

Although innumerable women have been affected to some extent by the rapidly-growing women's liberation movement, few have become actively involved in its ongoing activities. To enable them to do so, it is first of all essential that a women's liberation group be internally democratic; the general membership must have control, and the leadership must be responsible to that membership; i.e., accountable to it for its actions. Clique leaderships, such as those in the Vancouver Women's Caucus and the Toronto Women's Liberation Movement, rob the new movement of its vitality and power. While women who come to these groups may not have a great deal of political experience, they are very conscious of their own oppression, and will not be led by those any longer -- by the educational system, by the government, or by other women, attempting to manipulate them. These women come to the movement because they want to fight for control of their lives, and will settle for nothing less than full rights within the organizational forms of the movement.

Wherever there are clique leaderships or inner circles of decision-makers, new women, and women with different political perspectives from the self-appointed leadership, will never become integrated into the group or into the movement. The problem of new women coming to one or two meetings, never to be seen again, has been a perennial occurrence in the Vancouver Women's Caucus and other groups for these very reasons.

Just as women must not in any way be excluded from the decision-making process of the movement, so we must build the movement on a non-exclusionist basis in every respect. We must seek to bring all women, regardless of their political ideas, into the struggle around the demands of the women's liberation movement. We have to have confidence in the movement and in our ability to help it develop in an anti-capitalist direction. We must have confidence in women, their ability to draw the necessary conclusions, on the basis of their experience in the movement, about the nature of their oppression and the society which is responsible for it.

The problem of exclusion, and its stifling effect on the movement, was brought sharply into focus around the Abortion Caravan last spring. While the campaign showed the tremendous possibilities before the movement, it was marred by the operation of a self-appointed clique leadership, and an unwillingness on the part of that leadership to work with women who had political disagreements with them. These disagreements did not revolve around the demands of the Caravan. It should be possible for women to unite on the basis of agreed upon actions and demands without being forced to share an entire political philosophy. This is particularly important with women who are just becoming involved in the movement. Taken to its logical conclusion, exclusion can only lead to thought control, to the repression of ideas which do not coincide with those of the leadership, and finally to the total elimination of anyone who differs with the prevailing philosophy. Again a recent experience in Vancouver Women's Caucus is instructive in this respect. Recently members of the Young Socialists and the League for Socialist Action in Vancouver, who for months previously had participated in the work of the Caucus, were expelled on the instigation of the clique leadership of the Caucus. That expulsion was well documented and it is not the purpose of this paper to weigh the arguments in the case. But the thing is clear. The kind of baiting and exclusion carried out in the Vancouver Women's Caucus is incompatible with the kind of movement it is necessary to build to liberate women in this country. These are the tactics of the ruling class itself. We must learn to build a movement which can include all women, not fragment them even further. We must build a movement in which various ideas for program and actions can compete openly and honestly for the support of the majority of women.

Along with the fight for democracy in our own ranks, our strategy must embody the concept of a mass, action-oriented movement. This is the concept of getting people in motion, into action -- not talking down to them, but organizing actions which are able to give expression to the class opposition to the policies of the ruling class. Through their involvement in action, women can deepen their understanding of those issues. If there's one thing the ruling class in this country understands, it's thousands upon thousands of people organized and in motion, demonstrating in the streets, demanding change. This challenge to the legitimacy of their power is in fact the only logic that they do understand. Our actions must clearly place the responsibility for the oppression of women where it belongs, on the ruling class and the government of this country.

In the short history of the movement we have caught glimpses of the impact that the ideas of women's liberation have when it moves out with bold mass actions. To date, the most effective, most powerful development has most decidedly been the abortion campaign and the Caravan to Ottawa. Free abortion on demand has emerged as one of the central mobilizing demands of the movement. It was around this demand that the movement took a decisive step forward and launched the first cross-country action involving women's liberation groups from different areas and with different philosophies; and not even the elements of misleadership in a campaign could deter a mass response to this demand.

At every stop that the Caravan made, large numbers of women expressed support for the action, and began to identify with the women's liberation movement as a whole. The eyes of thousands of Canadians were focussed on the movement while we were in Ottawa -- they knew of the action, and many supported and defended it.

One of the most important questions facing the movement today is whether or not we will take advantage of the momentum that has been built up around the call for free abortion on demand, using it to escalate the struggle and to draw in new layers of women. It seems clear that if we were to continue to make the issue of abortion a key focus of women's liberation activity in the coming year, important gains can be made for the movement.

The issue of abortion is one that affects almost every woman in this society regardless of class, occupation or age, and for that reason thousands of women can be involved in the fight for free abortion on demand. Also, victory in this struggle will help to undermine one of the chief rationalizations for the oppression of women -- our vulnerability to unplanned pregnancy. It will help to throw into sharper relief the real causes of our oppression, which are economic and social, not biological.

Victory in the abortion struggle will help women realize how powerful they are when they unite in common action. It can provide an enormous impetus to the women's liberation struggle encouraging women to continue to fight around other issues as well. In many ways, the fight for free abortion on demand is the priority for the movement in the next period.

WORKING WITH OTHER GROUPS

Finally, the growing movement for women's liberation must look for all the support it can find. It must build bridges to other organizations and movements fighting on behalf of oppressed people and enlist their aid. In particular,

our movement should appeal to the organized trade union movement and the New Democratic Party, while at the same time maintaining our independent mass movement character. This orientation will not, as some fear, narrow women's concern with ending their own oppression but on the contrary it will give them a wider comprehension of the nature of that oppression and how to end it.

Relations with other organizations like the NDP have more than one aspect. For instance, pressure from the organized women's liberation movement can force the NDP to speak to our needs far more than it presently does. In return, the support of a movement with as broad a base of support as the NDP can do much to strengthen our movement. Already the NDP has come out in favour of universal child care, and free abortion on demand as a direct result of the growing support among women for these demands. As well, women's caucuses have begun to develop within the ranks of the NDP and these may well emerge as powerful tools in winning the NDP to the demands of women's liberation.

The organized union movement can obviously be of enormous assistance in our struggle for equality in the labour force. Organized labour is, in fact, one of the most powerful tools of the working class. The pressure which the woman's liberation movement puts on the trade unions to fight for their demands will also play a key role in democratizing those organizations by driving them in a revolutionary direction.

Women workers are part of the working class, and will not win their liberation without the liberation of that entire class. We have a duty to ourselves and to the rest of the working class to participate in the development of the new militant leaderships in the trade union movement, and to make women's liberation a major part of the programs on which this new leadership will build. We must have a leadership which will fight for the organizing of women.

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