

Our response to the Women's Health Collective-

The working class must lead women's movement

by SARA MURPHY

The following was written as part of a response to the Women's Health Collective. As a result of their attending PWOC's event on International Women's Day, an exchange of views was begun, starting with their criticisms of our views as put forth at International Women's Day. This article focuses on a question raised by many activists in the women's movement: What are the basic differences between Marxism-Leninism and Feminism?

To quote the Women's Health Collective:

We know we disagree about the basic causes of women's oppression. We believe that patriarchy has a force and life of its own, predating and outside of the capitalist economy. Because of this, we think an autonomous women's liberation movement will always be necessary part of the struggle to overthrow the present order.

Our most over-riding criticism lies in the way in which the women's movement and feminism was portrayed. For example, we found it ironic that feminism was denounced at a gathering celebrating International Women's Day -- feminism was casually described as a "false alternative" by the speaker from New York (a guest from El Comite/MINP, a Marxist-Leninist organization in New York City, made a statement at the IWD event, ed.). This event would not have taken place had not an autonomous women's liberation movement begun in the late 1960's, and had that movement not revived the holiday originally created by working women.

The women's movement was repeatedly described as a monolithic movement without a left and a right wing, and without ideological struggle. If you were describing the new communist movement you would make a much more precise delineation between different political tendencies and would project an understanding of the importance of the struggle between the reformist and revolutionary tendencies.

PWOC'S RESPONSE

While the Women's Health Collective raised many other points, both positive and critical, about our International Women's Day celebration, we felt this section of the letter raised the most profound political questions concerning the differences in perspective between feminism and Marxism-Leninism: How we see the question of an autonomous



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women's movement, how we see the various trends in the movement and the struggle between those trends, and how we see the resolution of that struggle.

Communists see the reality of a mass women's movement which arises under capitalism, and understand the need for mass women's organizations throughout the epoch of socialism. However, our aim is not to have these women's organizations "autonomous" but rather as an ally of and under the leadership of the multi-national working class.

It's true that our differences around this question stem from our theoretical view of the root causes of women's oppression. We see that women's oppression is as old as and is completely bound up with the origin of private property and class society. The Feminist view denies that women's oppression is based in class society, and in fact many see the matter in quite the opposite way -- that class society is but a reflection on a broader scale of male dominance, inherent in male-female relationships.

Thus, our entire approach to how to resolve the contradiction between women and men takes on a different character. We see that the working class has an objective interest in uniting the sexes on a basis of equality, of championing the cause of women's equality. Under socialism, the working class has an objective interest in abolishing economic inequality between men and women, and in doing away with all cultural manifestations of centuries of oppression. In our view, not only can the working class abolish sexist oppression through its revolution, but it must, and moreover, this is the only way women's oppression will be overcome.

DISTRUST OF WORKING CLASS REVOLUTION

The feminist failure to recognize the class basis of women's oppression, however, leads to a distrust of the worker's movement and the socialist revolution. Since the contradiction between the sexes is seen as a force outside class society, only an autonomous movement of women, setting itself apart from the struggles of the working class and oppressed nationalities, although joining with them in a limited way, could guarantee that the struggle against sexism is not "lost in the shuffle" of revolution.

Marxist-Leninists do not believe that women's oppression will spontaneously get taken care of as some sort of by-product of the socialist revolution. We hold that only a conscious and protracted struggle for full equality by the whole working class will produce this result. And that is precisely the point. By emphasizing autonomy, separation from the working class, feminism erects an obstacle to this process.

It diverts our attention away from the need to win the whole working class to the struggle for women's equality and counterposes to this the notion of an autonomous women's movement. The underlying premise is that the working class cannot be trusted with women's liberation because working class men do not have an objective interest in equality for women. This is the nub of our differences.



It is in this sense we think it is not only defensible but necessary to describe feminism as a "false alternative" as the comrade from El Comite did. We do not think there is any great irony or contradiction in saying this in light of the fact that International Women's Day was revived by the feminist movement. The Women's Health Collective seems to confuse a rejection of feminism as an ideology with a repudiation of feminism as a social movement.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT -- A PROGRESSIVE FORCE

We see the Women's Liberation Movement as one of the great progressive forces of the 60's and 70's. But we also see that it's revolutionary development is being held back by the political currents that dominate the movement. We think an ideological struggle must be waged to isolate and defeat these ideas if the movement is to go forward.

This is our attitude toward the other great social movements as well -- the Worker's Movement is dominated by trade union reformism which we combat -- the Black Liberation Movement contains various retrograde political tendencies which we combat. We obviously regard these movements as progressive nevertheless.

STRUGGLE FOR A WORKING CLASS PERSPECTIVE

For the PWOC the International Women's Day celebration was an attempt to wage this ideological struggle. Our primary aim was not to critique feminism for feminists, although that is an important front in the ideological struggle. Our purpose was to bring to a predominately working class audience of Black and white men and women that Women's Liberation is necessarily for the working class -- the working class needs equality for women, and the women's movement for democratic rights needs working class leadership. This was the burden of what we were trying to say.

In developing this theme it was absolutely necessary to draw clear lines of demarcation with feminism. Feminism is in the long run a dead end for the working class. And in the immediate feminist politics tend to prevent the working class from taking up the struggle for women's liberation as a conscious demand. Admittedly much of what is perceived as feminist politics is a caricature produced by the bourgeois media, but the real core of those politics -- its attitude toward class unity and its approach to class struggle -- cannot but help to go against the grain of the class conscious worker.

We think it was necessary to speak to Black women and make clear that a working class approach to women's liberation does not relegate the struggle against racism to second place. That has been their perception of the Women's Movement, and are they wrong?

We think it was necessary to speak to men and explain that a working class per-

spective on the struggle for women's liberation places emphasis on working men's real interests in fighting sexism and seeks to persuade them to take up this struggle. Male workers generally believe the Women's Movement is at best indifferent to their interests and at worst hostile to them. And can we say this attitude has no basis?

Our aim was to develop the understanding that the working class has to take up the struggle against sexism if it is to unite its ranks and go forward. Furthermore, we sought to bring forward the idea of the class conscious workers as a distinct and leading trend in the struggle to emancipate women.

Certainly we recognize that the Women's Movement is not a monolith, that it has a left and right wing. But this had little relevance to the themes of International Women's Day. While in other contexts such distinctions may very well be crucial, in this particular context they were largely beside the point. The differences between the various trends were not so important in that context as what they still have in common. And these differences pale in comparison to the gulf between the actual movement of today and the potential movement of tomorrow in which women of the working class and oppressed nationalities armed with a class conscious politics will provide leadership.

We saw International Women's Day as a very small, beginning step in that direction. While we in no way want to deny what has been progressive in the Women's Movement of the last decade, we have no interest in prettifying it either. Our interest is in bringing forward the movement's antagonism with capital and thus its revolutionary character. Our interest is in overcoming "autonomy" and forging strong unbreakable bonds with the movements of the working class and oppressed nationalities. Working class leadership can only develop in the struggle against the ideological influence of feminism.

We in no way see this ideological struggle as standing in contradiction to unity of action between Marxist-Leninists and Feminists in the fight against sexism. Furthermore, we welcome this struggle as a means of sharpening our differences and deepening our unity. We hope the Women's Health Collective will continue its course of principled criticism and dialogue with the PWOC in the pages of the *Organizer* and elsewhere.