



Why Women Need a Vanguard Party

by SARA MURPHY

male supremacy, wherever they rise up -- are threats to a system which bases itself on inequality of the sexes.

The essence of the capitalist system is the exploitation of labor -- the fact that so many work to produce the wealth of this country, but only a few reap the profits, while the rest of us are doled out just enough to survive and keep on producing. In three important ways, sexism is employed by the capitalist class to keep their rotten system going.

First, they are dependent on women's role in the home -- to maintain the family in food, clothes and clean surroundings, as well as to raise up a new generation of workers. Secondly, untold billions are gained from the super-profits resulting from sex discrimination in wages and hiring. Thirdly, the lies and myths about women's inferiority keep men workers from fighting discrimination against women, and result in a weak and divided working class.

Only a conscious and determined struggle against capital will point the way for real liberation for women. True equality is possible only in a socialist system which has nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by inequality of the sexes.

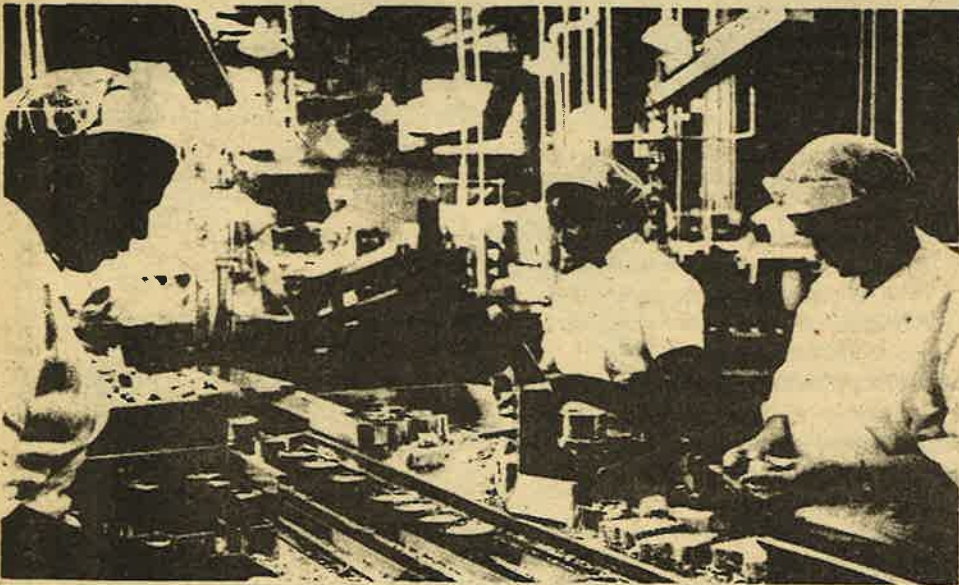
Wherever a fight against sex discrimination and sexist ideas appears -- in whatever form -- the powers that be sit up and take notice. They know that any gains for women's equality, except the most blatant tokenism are a part of the growing threat to a decaying system.

But one of the greatest problems in the women's movement today, is that although our enemy knows this, the movement itself does not. Women's

In the past few years, "women's liberation" has become a "household word" in the US and throughout the working class. Supposedly, the recent era has been one of great gains for women, and indeed the movement for democratic rights for women has made significant gains since the early sixties.

But with the economic recession of the '70's and a climate of political reaction against the working class and the oppressed nationalities, the modest gains of women have been under severe attack. The ERA has been bogged down, the right to abortion challenged, pregnancy disability denied, childcare facilities cut back, newly hired women laid off, wage differentials increased. While working class, and especially national minority women, have been the hardest hit by this reaction, women of the middle class have also suffered a setback.

Women are fighting back against all these attacks. Yet this fight back is scattered and haphazard. On a university campus, the layoff of a woman professor is protested. In a factory, chemicals which endanger women's reproductive capacities are the subject of a safety drive by the workers. In a hospital, women are in the forefront of a union organizing drive. Elsewhere, women have joined a rank and file caucus to push their do-nothing



unions into action. A group of women health professionals forms an alternative clinic more responsive to women's medical needs.

ALL WOMEN HAVE THE SAME ENEMY: CAPITALISM

Are all these struggles part of the "women's movement"? Scattered and unconnected as they are, all these women are taking up the struggle for women's rights. And in fact, conscious of it or not, all these women are fighting against the same enemy -- the capitalist class and the capitalist system itself.

The reason that the women's movement is pooh-poohed and belittled by the press, the reason that the Congress and the courts are working overtime to undermine any legal gains made by women, the reason why there is a very slick, vocal and extremely well-financed campaign against the ERA -- is because the struggles against

struggles are too narrow, too limited, too scattered -- and often directed against the wrong target. A vanguard party of the working class could provide the consciousness and leadership necessary to overcome these problems.

The democratic women's movement itself is isolated from the struggles of working class and national minority women. Its political perspective, that of white, middle class women, is petty-bourgeois in character. That is, middle class women see that sex discrimination is injurious to them, but do not see only a united struggle against capital is the only basis on which women can be liberated.

The democratic women's movement fails to recognize the special oppression of national minority women, and the centrality of the struggle against racism. It also fails to recognize the leading role that working class women can play in fighting both sex discrimination and capitalist exploitation. It places its own

needs as women over and above the interests of the working class as a whole. This is what Marxist-Leninists define as "feminism." In the short run, feminism can produce some gains for women, but in the long run it can only serve to isolate middle class women from the workers movement, setting back the cause of women's liberation.

One branch of the feminist movement, as represented by organizations such as NOW, takes a reformist approach to the struggle against sexism. With its middle class base and perspective, it expects to see equality for women realized within the confines of the capitalist system. Its tactics are largely confined to the law suit and the lobby. It remains content to struggle for gains for middle class women, such as more democratic rights in terms of women's participation in business, government, and the professions.

The struggle for the ERA is a good example. NOW fails to see that such an amendment -- like all reforms of the bourgeois system -- is a double-edged sword. The overall progressive edge is the step forward in the struggle for democracy for all women. But the other side of the sword is that as long as the state and the economy remain in the hands of the capitalists, the ERA can be used to take away gains which working class women have made over the years -- unless a mass movement of the working class is built to press for an interpretation of the law in a manner favorable to both working class women and men. We could, for example, see more decisions like the disability pay one -- saying that since neither men nor women get disability pay for pregnancy, it's not discriminatory. The reformist fail to see that reforms won on paper are not necessarily gains in reality -- the fact that the civil rights act legally guarantees women an end to discrimination in hiring which has yet to be realized -- is only one example of this basic truth.

RADICAL FEMINISTS FAIL TO SEE CLASS ENEMY, ALLIES

The other wing of the feminist movement, its radical wing, does see that a whole social revolution will be necessary if sexism is to be abolished. However, the character of the revolution they envision is based on a petty-bourgeois view of utopia, and bears little relation to the need for the working class to establish its rule and end the exploitation of labor by capital. Rather, the varied schemes of the radical feminists -- ranging from "cultural" revolutions to "women's nations" -- see men as a whole as the enemy of women, failing to see that it is the capitalist class who we must fight, while we must build unity with men of the working class.

Both the radical and the reform wing of feminism fail to see the class essence of women's oppression, the need for the women's movement to unite with the workers' movement and the movements of the oppressed nationalities, in a determined struggle against our common oppressor and exploiter -- the capitalist class, and eventually against the capitalist system itself. Only a vanguard communist party can provide the leadership necessary to win the democratic women's movement to this correct view.

Within the working class, too, the struggle for women's rights needs a party's leadership if it is to overcome its narrow and haphazard character. The struggle against racism is central to white women joining with their Black sisters, who are often -- because of their history of struggle against national oppression -- in the forefront of women's struggles in the working class.

Along with this, a determined effort must be made to root out sexism from among the men of the workers' movement, so that male workers can unite with their class sisters on a basis of equality, acting together for their common interests: one of which is and must be the struggle against sex discrimination.

Only a highly organized vanguard party, equipped with the most advanced possi-

ble theory, can take up these tasks with hopes of accomplishing them. Only a party of the most advanced fighters from the workers' movement, the movements of the oppressed nationalities, and the women's movement can gain the collective understanding necessary to weld these potentially powerful forces together into one iron fist.

THEORY TO GUIDE THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In the first place, a party provides the theory and conscious leadership necessary to build the movement for women's liberation. This theory is not some set of abstract formulas we quote from Lenin or Mao, but is rather the guide we need to accomplish our goals. By studying the experience of the workers' movements, throughout the world, the history of class society and women's place in it, and applying that knowledge to the history and situation of the US, we can come up with a theory that is capable of equipping the party cadre with the consciousness necessary to lead the fight for women's liberation.



To do this we must have a theory which explains the root causes of women's oppression, in class society and in capitalist society in particular. This theory must understand the particular forms women's oppression takes in the US today -- the character of housework, the role of the family, the particular history and situation of Black women, and so on. This theory can show us the correct strategy for attaining our long range goals, can teach us who are the true allies of women and who are the real enemies. It can reveal the tactics for our day-to-day work. It can equip the leaders of the fight for women's liberation with the consciousness needed to incorporate the struggle against racism and the struggle for working class unity into the women's movement at every turn.

The organization of the party serves to provide collective methods for gleaning this theory and for equipping its cadre with consciousness to carry out its tasks. With this scientific understanding, the party will link up the spontaneous and scattered shots in the dark against capital, and bring them out into the light of understanding. The fights for Black Liberation, for Women's Liberation, and for the emancipation of the working class can be united by the party's leadership, so that the aim we take is straight and true, and the target is the true enemy of us all.

If the struggle against sexism in the working class is to bear fruit, if the fight against sex discrimination by women of all classes is to make real gains, if the special oppression of national minority women is to be overcome, we must build a party capable of uniting and providing conscious leadership to all the struggles against sexism. Such a party can take up the struggles against narrow feminist and reformist consciousness within the women's movement, the struggle against racism among white women, and against sexism among men of the working class. Only such a party can weld together the united front which can once and for all end the exploitation of one class by another, and with it the oppression of women.