

THE RED WOMEN'S DETACHMENT:

Revolting Rhetoric & Revolutionary Questions

The following three pages are devoted to consideration of some papers received recently from the Southern Female Rights Union and a draft constitution of the Red Women's Detachment, a part of the Marxist-Leninist Party. Nowhere on these pages have we considered the questions of the Red Women's organizational principles, the advisability of willing a vanguard party into existence, or many other questions about the role of women in the structure of a Marxist-Leninist Party. We are interested in comments from other groups about the Red Women and the issues they raise.

Many of the issues raised by the Red Women have been avoided in other groups in our eagerness to spread the word and promote the growth of women's liberation. While we have always recognized such issues as abortion as two-edged swords, we rarely publish such doubts or actively discourage women from working in any way on women's liberation.

Some of the issues we have been groping with--for example, homosexual oppression--Red Women have made strong statements about. While our internal criticism has been carried on continually, the overriding principle has been that women must raise their own consciousness as women. Some of the issues we should be speaking to have barely been touched in *Ain't I A Woman*, although they have been considered extensively in cell meetings and discussion workshops. Such questions as the long term consequences of fighting for abortion reform, establishing day care centers, and developing an analysis of lesbianism compatible with women's liberation have generally been missing from the paper. One article on "The Lesbian in the Feminist Movement" (issue 2) raised the point that "it isn't good enough for straight women to say that they love women and then turn to give their ultimate love to their oppressor." It went further to say that "Lesbians have experienced women's oppression simply because they don't need men and haven't been 'protected' by being treated as a privileged sex." Both of these statements seemed politically wrong. The first because it sees individual men as the cause of oppression and avoids systemic causes; the second because it defines lesbian oppression as an exception to women's oppression. It says that lesbians experience oppression by being exceptions to those things other women experience: lesbian oppression begins where experience: lesbian oppression begins when they give up the "privileges" of other women. If the source of lesbian oppression is

everything not shared with other women, a women's liberation may not be a useful means to ending that oppression. We think this definition of lesbian oppression is wrong and that lesbians and other women together must come to a better understanding.

One of our main considerations has been broadening the women's movement at the same time we work out an analysis of women's oppression that ensures a way to end it. We do not begin with the assumption of an inevitable proletarian revolution in this country in the same way Red Women do. We begin with a desire to figure the form and shape of a revolution in an industrially developed country, one for which no historical precedent will suffice. To do this all forms of expression have been exchanged and women speaking to their own oppression has been most important. Thus, gay women have been open in their statements to other women, and together women have been forming an analysis of lesbianism and the forms of sexual oppression in American society. If we want a larger strategy of revolution to ensure the end of lesbian oppression, working out that analysis seems crucial now. The needs of the people are not all material, and the structural changes brought about by a revolution can be better if we listen now.

The Red Women raise some important issues, but they raise them with a rhetoric hardly conducive to open discussion. The paper on Gay Liberation is one example. While it purports to be a historical analysis of homosexuality, it is more a call to smash Gay Liberation and it is particularly offensive to lesbians. A reply from one member of the Gay Cell follows. While Red Women say near the end of the paper that lesbians are a different matter and they are only writing about male homosexuality, the paper was not helpful in any construction of an analysis of lesbian oppression.

While Red Women claim to be "the definite hard-core of the women's movement as a whole, the point at which leadership is being developed, serious political and ideological struggle is taking place, and new cadres are being prepared for struggle" their targets of attack are mostly other women. Hardly conducive to building a women's movement. Yet the issues they raise are important--abortion as genocide, the middle class nature of WLF, the importance of an international movement of women, the meaning of armed struggle--and are ones we should be dealing with.

(The following article found on pages 8 and 9 is in response to the Red Women's Detachment paper concerning the Gay Liberation Front.)

The Red Women's Detachment has written a paper on Feminism, Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation which is being circulated within the Women's Liberation movement by the New Orleans Female Workers Union. We in Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Front have been trying to analyze the position of Gay Liberation in the revolution for a long time. This paper is a start in that it made us rigorously look at issues that concern Gay Liberation Front, but it was a false start because it is only destructive. The Red Women's Detachment urges revolutionary feminists to organize to smash the Gay Liberation movement because they see Gay Liberation Front as being promoted by the ruling class to destroy the revolutionary potential of the feminist movement. The Red Women's Detachment arrives at this analysis of GLF by using two different definitions of homosexuality.

The pillar of their argument is an analogy between feudal times and present day Imperialist society. According to the Red Women's Detachment two things are common to both periods: The rise in homosexuality and the rise in the struggle of women. They say that in pre-feudal times homosexuality was a sexual practice, but during feudalism it came to mean the social relationship between men in the organizations that sprang up at that time--the guilds, the knight-

hood, the church. Homosexual relations, say the Red Women's Detachment, were the basis for the existence of these organizations and the predominant form of homosexual relationship under feudalism and imperialism is one in which one man is dominant and one submissive or passive. Accompanying the rise in male-dominated social organizations during feudalism was the greatest slaughter and oppression of women in history--the witch hunts.

The Red Women's Detachment sees the same thing happening (that is the rise in homosexuality and the increased oppression of women) in contemporary society. They see such homosexual relations in German, Italian and Japanese fascism and the native American fascism of the KKK and minutemen. The analogous rise in the oppression of women is what the Red Women's Detachment is afraid will happen if we do not stop the spread of homosexuality. The Gay Liberation Front, as a new organization of homosexuals is part of the present rise in homosexuality and must also be stopped.

But I don't think the Red Women's Detachment's definition of homosexuality as a social phenomenon applies to the Gay Liberation Front. Gay Liberation Front is an organization of people (men and women, unlike the males-only organizations of feudalism) who are defined as homosexual because of our sexual orientation. It may be homosexual in the social sense also in that the members relate to one another, but it has a definite sexual base. Gay Liberation Front is different in another way also. It does not wield the power that the feudal

organizations did. They were the structures around which feudal society revolved. Out of all the words that could be used to describe a male supremacist society such as feudalism, the word "homosexual" seems to have been chosen by the Red Women's Detachment to aid their argument against Gay Liberation. The analogy may hold true if you stick to the social definition of homosexuality in both eras. Then the guilds etc. become analogous to the male dominated power structures of our society. But Gay Liberation Front in that it is not part of the power structure and not homosexual in the same sense is not to be feared in the same way.

The Red Women's Detachment is not just saying that there is a similarity between feudalism and contemporary society, they are saying that gay liberation is being promoted by Imperialism and that it is a tool of the ruling classes to put down the revolutionary potential of the feminist movement. They arrive at this connection between gay liberation front and the ruling class by a shabby use of Marxian economics. The predominant homosexual-feudal relationship, according to the Red Women's Detachment is dominant male/submissive partner, with the junior partner performing unpaid slave labor for the other. "The class role of the headmaster towards his pupil, the army officer towards his orderly, the older 'auntie' or 'queen' towards 'the inevitably younger men' is the same as the husband towards the wife. In all these cases the basis of the relationship is unpaid slave labor

Draft Constitution of the RED WOMEN'S DETACHMENT

1. The Red Women's Detachment is the mass organization of proletarian women under the leadership of the MARXIST-LENINIST PARTY guided by Mao Tse Tung Thought.
2. Its ranks are open to all workingclass women who accept its politics and organizational principles. Revolutionary women of petty-bourgeois class origin will be admitted provided they break their class ties and do not exploit the labor of others.
3. The Red Women's Detachment practices democratic-centralism and combines political struggle with armed struggle, with politics in command.

The highest body of the Red Women's Detachment is the general membership, which, when not assembled (in Congress), is led by the Central Committee elected by it.

The Central Committee directs the Women's Armed Defense Groups
The Central Committee established the Central Organ.
The Central Committee of the Red Women's Detachment is directly responsible to the Central Committee of the Marxist-Leninist Party.

4. There are basically three levels of organizations:
 - (1) MAO TSE TUNG THOUGHT STUDY GROUPS (legal)
 - (2) MARTIAL ARTS (Self-Defense) COLLECTIVES (legal-semi-legal)
 - (3) WOMEN'S ARMED DEFENSE GROUPS (clandestine)

The MAO TSE TUNG THOUGHT STUDY GROUPS are organs of struggle-criticism-transformation, an ideological, political school for the living application of Mao Tse Tung Thought. It is a testing-ground for prospective cadre.

The MARTIAL ARTS COLLECTIVES train in un-armed self-defense and study Marxism-Leninism applied to military science to prepare for the more advanced level of armed struggle.

WOMEN'S ARMED DEFENSE GROUPS comprise the advanced proletarian military cadre of the Red Women's Detachment. These are securely and clandestinely organized. They are directly responsible to the Marxist-Leninist Party.

The Red Women's Detachment wholly supports and participates in the formation of People's Armed Defense Groups and Workers Armed Defense Groups. Women's Armed Defense Groups lay the basis for equal military participation of women in the revolutionary RED WORKERS ARMY.

5. The Central Organ (editorial staff) issues RED STAR as the collective organizer of the Red Women's Detachment.

The Central Organ is directly responsible to the Central Committee of the Red Women's Detachment. Its functions are to ensure the political clarity of its contents, stabilize publication, and develop the widest possible circulation. Systematic distribution of RED STAR and other mass agitational-propaganda materials is conducted through the various organizations.

rendered by the oppressed to the oppressor." The Red Women's Detachment concludes that since all these relationships are homosexual (social relations between males) in that they are dominant/submissive and since they are all based on one partner doing unpaid labor for the other, these homosexual relationships are based on the class contradictions in society and that homosexuality serves either one class or another.

Now, before we even begin to look at the logic of their argument, I want to know why they have inserted into a series of relations that are homosexual in the social sense, a relation that is homosexual in the sexual sense (auntie/younger men)? If the Red Women's Detachment has decided that word "homosexual" stands for a certain social relationship, then why are sexual innuendos and tirades sprinkled throughout the paper. For example, the following sentence which looks like it was taken from a Victorian textbook of sex education: "All of the lamented 'loneliness' and 'sadness' connected with the present day homosexual, including the deliberately ironic and sarcastic use of the term 'gay' is merely the expression of the basic frustration and physical tension associated with this kind of relationship, which at the most erotic level can only be a mutual masturbation, and which almost inevitably degenerates into fetishism, sadism, torture, and cannibalism." Either their logic can't cover up their horrendous homosexism or the two different definitions of homosexuality need to be mixed in with each other so that it seems that there is only one meaning to the word.

People obtain power and worth in a society according to their relationship to the means of production. The husband/wife relationship can be easily analyzed from this perspective. The husband possesses a relation to the means of production (on whatever level) but the wife has none--her labor is considered non-production by society and she is not paid for it. Therefore, there is material basis for saying that the husband wields power over the wife, is master to her as she is slave to him, and thus they consequently have a class relationship --he being in a class over her. The relations of the other couples in the series to the means of production are not the same as the husband/wife because unlike the wife all the others (with the temporary exception of the student) possess a relation to the means of production. Any domination by one member of the couple over the other as in the army officer/orderly for example, is not based simply on class. Or to put it another way, the dominant/submissive roles they play aren't based on their relation to the means of production. The dynamics of all those relationships come from a number of different sources in the structure of society. These should be explored--not just painted black and white and dismissed as class. Unpaid labor is not rendered by one partner to the dominant one in each of the cases. Thus it can't be said that those homosexual relations or presently Gay Liberation Front are based on the class contradictions in society and serve one class or another.

It is true as the Red Women's Detachment points out that the bourgeois media views gay libera-

Received from the Southern Female Rights Union along with papers excerpted from the Red Women's Detachment:

The staff of the former Southern Female Rights Union and other women in New Orleans, through study and practice, have arrived at a different political direction than we have held in the past. SFRU has dissolved, discarding the name, and the women from that organization are working towards building a New Orleans Female Workers Union. Some of us who have not been working are getting jobs in industrial, lower clerical and service work to join with working class cadre to build a working class base for the women's movement in this area.

We believe that this is the direction the women's movement in general must take to truly serve the liberation of women and all oppressed people.

As women committed to international proletarian revolution, we have been studying and groping for an expression of our developing theory, and we are halt-

ingly beginning to practice following proletarian leadership among the female cadres here. We know women in many places, involved in women's liberation, are in a similar situation as ourselves...

Though we have developed somewhat different concepts than the Red Women's Detachment, we are in basic agreement with the principles expressed in these papers, particularly the recognition and material support of the Black, Chicano, Native American and Puerto Rican national struggles within the North American continent and the struggles of women under the leadership of proletarian women.

For material from the Red Women's Detachment send postage costs to 602 E. 11th St., Apt. 12, New York City, 10009. (Excerpts from RED STAR, organ of the Red Women's Detachment can be obtained from SFRU, Box 30087, Lafayette Square Station, New Orleans, Louisiana, 70130.)

The Red Women's Discussion of Feminism, Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation creates a dichotomy between the necessity of waging an armed struggle and the necessity for desired cultural changes, many of which women's liberation has been concerned with. Red Women seem to be saying that waging a cultural revolution is to wage a counter-revolution to the armed struggle for the creation of a socialist/communist society. They see no hope for Gay Liberation to be anything but counter revolutionary and they view feminism and women's liberation as divided into two camps. The revolutionary feminists ally themselves with the proletarian women to wage an armed struggle. Women's oppression they define at the point of work, at the point of production, and in terms of females as workers. The Women's Liberation Movement, as they see it, is narrow political reformism, "...that proposes to tack on an extra point or two to a world already long accepted."

I question their conception of the women's liberation movement as one they can exemplify by electoral campaigns waged by the Socialist-Workers Party/Young Socialist Alliance. Is an electoral campaign waged by the YSA indicative of the women's liberation movement? Most of women's liberation has not spent their time on such obvious examples of Amerikan liberalism, or cooptation. Clearly, the Red Women's Detachment are not dealing with women's liberation but with obvious examples of campaigns waged by others in the name of the rights of women, in this case, a campaign by a group which has not even begun to understand the validity of the issues raised by women's liberation.

We have spent time questioning the cultural position of women and in doing this recognize that not only must the labor of women be valued and women be in control of the means of production (along with men) but that certain cultural stereotypes and power relationships be destroyed. A wife is a subordinate, paid or unpaid.

Revolutionary feminists, say the Red Women's Detachment, are concerned with the fundamental question of marriage as an institution based on slave labor while women's liberation can see marriage only in terms of rights and legal provisions. Again, the Red Women have drawn a false dichotomy, implying that women's liberation simply wants to make marriage a more equitable relationship. We also see the need to do away with marriage. Doing that is a necessary step in freeing women but it is only part of the overall relationship women as a class have to men as a class, and we want that whole relationship questioned. Marriage is an

institutional relationship which reinforces cultural roles. Such institutions must go, but the relationships of weak over strong, leader over follower, powerful over powerless, are what we want to end. To attack only a symptom of such relationships is to avoid the hard questions revolutionary feminists should be asking. If the essence of feminism can be gotten to by being against marriage, there are plenty of male feminists around. If that's all revolutionary feminists want to fight for as women, they have simply tacked on an extra point or two to a revolutionary scheme already long accepted.

The Red Women's Detachment and many other political groups apparently see a real danger in giving attention to how people relate to each other, in questioning the heterosexual norm, in exploring the cultural image of women, an image we have been socialized into believing. Attempting to work collectively and attack elitism and hierarchical structures, to question the family structure or to try to understand the role sex plays in our lives is viewed as liberal and reformist. Giving attention to any of this is often seen as a privileged indulgence when there is a revolution to be waged. Usually this criticism comes from leftist men who have lost their typists, but we should treat this criticism differently when it comes from other women.

Most of us active in Women's Liberation have questioned our priorities. We want the liberation of all people and have been afraid of the tendency we have to deal with all these issues by proposing personal solutions or fighting for reforms which could be granted under a capitalist society and would benefit an already privileged class of women. We are painfully aware that there is the tendency to forget that the questions we raise do not always speak to the immediate needs of the poor women struggling to exist, not having the freedom or time to seek the solutions that many of us find available through class privileges. But we must insist that women in any class have special problems and women in any revolution will have special problems, that sexism and racism will not simply disappear by defining women and blacks as workers.

There is a lot to be said on how we bring about a revolution to establish the society we want. There really is no choice to be made between waging an armed struggle based on the needs of the proletariat and fighting to destroy a culture dependent on sexism and racism. One is irrevocably tied to the other. We do not see the possibility of poor women waging a revolution unless they are somehow freed to do so. Just as they do not have the time to opt for middle class privileges, they do not have the freedom or time to

train for self-defense or revolutionary leadership. This freedom is a preliminary step to the real battle unless of course we believe in the cliché of the inevitable proletarianization of women. (A point I would like to see the Red Women address themselves to--what does it mean, how does it relate to past Marxist theory in which the household work of women has never been related to the means of production? Do women become proletarian by magically passing into the labor force?) In that case we don't have to do much of anything but train to fight when the inevitable mass revolt of proletarians occurs and be prepared to join them (or lead them).

We see revolution as not something that just happens, but as something we must be bringing about. Some things are probably necessary steps to waging a revolution, for example, day care free to women for releasing them from the sole responsibility for child raising. And we do not accept the bourgeois definition of human nature that would have us content and placid once granted those things we see as necessary for women before they can even begin to fight for the society they envision. (Why is it so many of those revolutionary women who were fighting in the early labor battles turn out to be middle class "drop-outs" or women who were past the age of caring for their children?) Does dealing with these cultural issues incapacitate us for armed struggle? The Red Women's Detachment seems to think it does while we think it can aid us. Perhaps it does incapacitate if armed struggle is an end in itself or if women's needs can be met so easily. But if meeting the needs of the people is to mean anything it begins before armed struggle, it prepares you for it, it provides a meaning to your revolution, it threatens the status quo and power relationships, and increases your understanding of the place in history in which your revolution will occur.

If we are committed to wage a revolution to establish a society we see as decent, we must be concerned with what kind of society we want. If we see a revolution that happens because people whose needs are not being met now make it happen, we must constantly attempt to define that society--a society that a mass base of people will fight for. There is no question that much will have to be destroyed as a necessary step to creating that society, just as the Chinese found that much had to be destroyed in the cultural realm even after many years of a continuing revolution. But we do not see the possibility of creating a society out of only the knowledge of what we reject. We must begin to define what we want.

The problems we seek solutions to are real. The sexual revolution did not arise only as some imperialist plot to further the oppression of women. It arose in part because there was a need people felt for freedom from the repression we all suffer. It is not at all surprising that a male dominated society trying to bring about a sexual revolution would do so without considering the needs of women. For women the sexual revolution was a sham and therein lies the sadness--it was a sham--a failure which is not to say a real sexual revolution, a real coming to grips with our sexuality is not needed. We can't dismiss it as an imperialist plot, but should attempt to understand it along with our understanding of imperialism which is an outward manifestation of the control of the means of production by a class and not vice versa.

We will learn much about how to wage a revolution once we begin waging one. It is impossible to think a fixed theory on how to wage a revolution is available--all real revolutions that have occurred in this century have done so by breaking at important points with Marxist theory--Russia by making a revolution in an industrially backward country, China by making the peasant the base of the revolution and Cuba by making a revolution without a Marxist-Leninist party apparatus. We need to read Marx, Lenin, Mao, Guevara, Fanon, and all other revolutionary inspirations and aids, but we will never be in the position to recreate their revolutions. Only as we enlarge our struggle will we begin to know the means necessary and the society we are struggling for.



Militant militia women of the People's Republic of China.