

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

The role of communists

No one can deny that the masses of women in the United States lack full democratic rights. This lack of rights is felt particularly severely by working class women who do not have the same rights as men to jobs, job training, job promotions, equal pay for equal work, etc. For oppressed nationality working women this inequality is interwoven with the national oppression they face into a bleak fabric of capitalist brutality. The great masses of women also lack many other elementary rights such as the right to free and safe abortion on demand and an end to forced sterilizations (of oppressed nationality women), and an end to being used as guinea pigs for testing of birth control pills, etc.

The current economic crisis has intensely affected working women as they face massive lay-offs, cut-backs in the work week, fewer and fewer job opportunities, higher prices, and general cut-backs in social services.

All the various types and instances of women's oppression are reflective of their lack of democratic rights, (the "right" to be equal wage slaves with men). It is the task of communists to analyze the movement of women -- historically and currently -- and to synthesize the struggle of women around partial demands. In doing this we develop the commonality of those struggles -- the mass line -- EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN!!

THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

The struggle of women for their rights is a historic one, whose current manifestations have found expression in the heroic stand of the Farah and Oneita strikers -- most of whom were oppressed nationality women, and who raised special demands regarding women. However the overall political movement of women has historically been led by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women (particularly the movement to win women the vote). There is nothing at all strange in this. Capitalism sees to it that the working masses are kept culturally and politically backward -- otherwise it would not be capitalism. As the most cultured and best-educated among the masses of women it is natural for them to articulate the political demands of women and to try and win leadership of the movement of women for democracy. As Comrade Lenin remarked -- every democratic demand put forward by communists has been put forward before us by the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie. And, of course, they put these demands forward in their own class interests. There is nothing profound about this observation either -- it is an ABC of Marxism. The petty-bourgeoisie have expressed the demand for women's right by fighting for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. This is a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution which reads "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the U.S. or by any State on account of sex. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article." Various bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces



have attempted without success, to pass this amendment since 1923, but with the impetus of the massive uprisings of the oppressed nationalities in the 1960's, the women were again stirred into motion in the struggle for their democratic rights and the fight for the passage of the ERA was resumed. ATM believes that those groups which opposed the ERA because it is being championed by the petty-bourgeoisie are incorrect, and are, in fact, capitulating leadership of the women's democratic movement to the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie.

As we have said, capitalism makes it inevitable that the more educated representatives from among the masses will be the first to put forward democratic demands. And of course, the bourgeoisie will often be split (tactically) in their attitude toward these demands. For instance, Gerald Ford, Nelson Rockefeller, the AFL-CIO and others support the passage of the ERA. Opponents include the Teamsters, the Mormon Church, Barry Goldwater, the CPUSA, etc. The Rockefeller and company see the ERA as a way to pacify the rising demands of women and at the same time will try to use it to attack protective legislation. The Goldwaters and company see only the aspects of formal equality and are afraid that their profits will be cut by having to give equal pay for equal work, etc. (Goldwater and other "conservatives" like him represent the interests of the smaller monopolists, or non-monopoly capitalists who often operate in the South and Southwest where it is somewhat easier for them to super-exploit women workers). We don't know of any democratic demand which doesn't call for such tactical differences among the capitalist class. This doesn't mean that we base OUR (communists) stand on what one or another capitalist grouping does, (although we must take such contradictions into account). The questions that communists must ask in determining their position are. (1) what does this movement represent, and can we win the leadership of it, (and if so, how?), (2) can the ERA represent a step forward for the masses of women, especially working women?

THE ONLY REAL FREEDOM IS SOCIALISM!

Before answering these questions we want to make clear that NO reform

can truly emancipate women. As long as capitalism exists, with a handful of parasites controlling all the land, banks and factories, with the rest of us HAVING to work for them to survive -- women will face oppression and exploitation. Only socialism, a system run by and for working people, can emancipate women and create the real conditions for their equality. This does not mean however that we cannot better the condition of the masses of women, even under capitalism. WE CAN -- if we fight to do so.

WHY ARE THERE COMMUNISTS??

In examining the historic struggle for women we can see that this movement involves the broad masses of working women, and is aimed at the capitalist class.

In March 1908 thousands of the working women of New York City took to the streets in demand of the 8 hour working day, the right to vote, and an end to child labor.

In 1909, 30,000 women members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union from New York, Philadelphia and Chicago went on strike. Their strike brought the union shop to the garment industry and represented a great step of advance for the entire working class. (Note: As an example of the special oppression of women, they were excluded from unions for decades. The American Federation of Labor, founded in 1880, excluded both women and oppressed nationalities from membership.)

The 1960's and 1970's has witnessed the thousands of Farah working women standing up to the cops, dogs and tear gas in struggle against the oppression they faced as Chicanas, as workers and as women. It was the

NOTE TO OUR READERS:

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-- FIGHT FOR THE E.R.A.!

united strength of both Black and White women which brought a union to the Oneita Knitting Mills located in the Black Belt South.

At present the women's movement is under the leadership of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women. The National Organization of Women is more or less the organizational embodiment of this leadership. However it need not REMAIN UNDER THEIR LEADERSHIP if only communists show themselves to be willing, able and effective organizers of their struggle for equality -- if communists think and act like REVOLUTIONARIES, instead of cowering in fear of what the bourgeoisie MIGHT do with the ERA. If we are merely content to sit on the sidelines and look down upon the women's movement, then of course, it will remain essentially reformist. But this is not the path of communists. We are revolutionaries--eager

to respond to any challenge if it will help lead the masses towards socialist revolution. Our ONLY reason for existence is to give leadership to the spontaneous struggles of the masses, to organize that struggle and give it a conscious direction. We do not exist merely to write polemics, to talk profoundly, or to congratulate ourselves on the correctness of our line. No comrades we communists are people of ACTION, and we CAN win the leadership of the masses of women if we answer the question of ERA correctly.

IS THE ERA A "SHAM" REFORM?

To pose the question of the ERA as one of "genuine" or "sham" reform is to betray one's total ignorance of Marxism-Leninism. The Workers Viewpoint Organization is particularly famous for this creative pro-

fundity. The WVO purports to be telling us something exciting and new by saying that the bourgeoisie will try and use various reforms to split the working class, to channel its energy along the line of least resistance, etc. This observation is as profound as saying "capitalism means exploitation" -- the most backward worker knows this. The most backward worker also knows that the capitalists will also try to strengthen their hands through trade union contracts! Yes, astonished comrades from WVO -- those nasty capitalists try and use trade union contracts to divide the working class (particularly skilled and unskilled), to channel the workers' struggle along the path of least resistance (extended grievance procedure, arbitration, etc.). And, of course, what is true in the realm

(Continued on page 11)

ERA...

(Continued from page 3)

of economics is at least as true in the realm of politics. Does WVO really believe that even in its progressive period the bourgeoisie saw political democracy as anything besides a ruse with which to fool the working masses? WVO does not answer with facts, the question -- can the ERA represent a forward step for the masses of women? They instead chose to rant and rave about how the ERA will "split the working class" (with no proof offered of course):

"They (the liberals) help to lay the groundwork for women to fight with men for jobs, pitting women against men and helping to pro-

mote a split in the working class, diverting attention from the real enemy -- the bourgeoisie."

(Workers Viewpoint, vol.1,#1,p.20)

And they go on to say that the ERA will not bring even temporary benefits to working people. These are certainly fine assertions -- unfortunately WVO offers not ONE fact to back them up! What is a fact is that women's inequality is, by and large, sanctioned by law and "custom". It is a fact that masses of women are fighting against this. It is a fact that the ERA will knock down those barriers, as long as its passage is won through revolutionary mass struggle.

"But wait a minute", WVO will say, "What about protective legislation"?

Anyone who believes that the bourgeoisie needs an ERA to attack the hard-won gains of workers really

does have illusions about capitalism. The bourgeoisie is attacking protective legislation all over the country -- NOT because of the ERA (which hasn't even been passed) -- but because they are in the middle of a severe economic crisis, and because COMMUNISTS are not leading the struggle of the masses to defend protective legislation and to expand it to cover all workers.

No, the WVO acts in the manner of those petty-bourgeois politicians referred to by the Comintern in 1930 in their resolution on the Negro Question. The WVO refuses to fight for "formal" equality. "In the U.S. today where bourgeois democracy is highly consummated, to demand constitutional reforms (as distinct from concrete legislation such as specific protective legislation) that only grant abstract principles

(Continued on page 12)

E.R.A....

(Continued from page 11) of equality is nothing but reactionary!" (ibid. pg. 18). The Comintern said in reference to those who would substitute the revolutionary formulation of democratic demands (such as Equal Rights for Women) with long lists of "concrete" demands:

"One should not venture to draw up a complete program of some kind, or a system of 'positive' partial demands. Such programs on the part of petty-bourgeois politicians should be exposed as attempts to divert the masses from the necessary hard struggles by fostering reformist and democratic illusions among them."

But the WVO would have to say that the CI was wrong, that they don't understand that imperialism is reaction all along the line, that bourgeois democracy -- "has not become thoroughly reactionary, and.. serves to usher in fascism." (op cit., pg 18) No, rather than starting from the partial demands of women (for daycare, welfare, equal pay for equal work, right to jobs, etc) and linking those partial struggles to the basic democratic demand for equal rights and mobilizing and organizing a revolutionary struggle for that demand -- WVO would rather break the basic demand down into small component partial demands, which are of course, "realizable" and "concrete". Lenin had to deal with the same type of arguments and he responded as follows:

"That objection reveals complete failure to understand the relation between democracy in general and capitalism. The conditions that make it impossible for the oppressed classes to 'excercise' their democratic rights are not the exception under capitalism; they are typical of the system. In most cases the right of divorce will remain unrealisable under capitalism, for the oppressed sex is subjugated economically. No matter how much democracy there is under capitalism, the woman remains a 'domestic slave', a slave locked up in the bedroom, nursery, kitchen. The right to elect their 'own' people's judges, officials, school-teachers, jurymen, etc., is likewise in most cases unrealisable under capitalism precisely because of the economic subjection of the workers and peasants. The same applies to the democratic republic. our programme defines it as 'government by the people' though all (communists) know perfectly well that under capitalism, even in the most democratic republic, there is bound to be bribery of officials by the bourgeoisie and an alliance of stock exchange and the government.

"Only those who cannot think straight or have no knowledge of Marxism will conclude so there is no point in having a republic, no point in freedom of divorce, no point in democracy, no point in self-determination of nations! But Marxists know that democracy does not abolish class oppression. It only makes the class struggle more direct, wider, more open and pronounced, and that is what we need. The fuller the freedom of divorce, the clearer will women see that the source of their

'domestic' slavery is capitalism, not lack of rights. The more democratic the system of government, the clearer will the workers see that the root evil is capitalism, not lack of rights." (LCW, vol. 23, pg. 73)'

It is WVO's failure to grasp the relationship between the struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism that leads them to their dead end. Socialism does not occur as the result of one big battle which happens after communists do a certain amount of agitation and propaganda. Socialism will occur as a result of numerous battles on the economic and political front, during which communists try to lead the masses, THROUGH THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE to the conclusion that revolution is necessary and inevitable. Moreover, someday the proletariat will have to exercise a system of proletarian democracy (as well as dictatorship). It will not learn how to do this except through the most consistent struggle for democracy (especially for oppressed nationalities and women) under capitalism, thirdly the masses will learn that only revolutionary struggle can win them any type of meaningful concession from the bourgeoisie. Lastly, the masses will learn that it is not the lack of democracy which underlies their misery -- but capitalism, that only socialism can bring women true equality and emancipation.

OUR TASKS

Presently there is a big debate going on inside of the National Organization of Women between the bourgeoisie and upper petty-bourgeoisie who want to confine NOW to strictly feminist issues and to the organizing of professional women; and the petty-bourgeoisie who want to concentrate on organizing working women and minorities, raising issues pertinent to the latter. Right now, the latter are gaining the upper hand and they will take their feminist stand and viewpoint into the class, (witness Alice Doesn't Day, which caught all Communists unprepared to lead). We can't let them win the leadership of the masses of working women

"It is our direct duty to concern ourselves with every liberal question, to determine our Social-Democratic attitude towards it, to help the proletariat to take an active part in its solution and to accomplish the solution in its own, proletarian way. Those who refrain from concerning themselves



in this way (whatever their intentions) in actuality leave the liberals in command, place in their hands the political education of the workers, and concede the hegemony in the political struggle to elements which, in the final analysis, are leaders of bourgeois democracy." (LCW, vol. 5, pg. 341)

We communists must be the hardest fighters for the demands of women but we MUST link it to the struggle for Equal Rights. We must be the one who organize the entire working class to strike and demonstrate for the passage of the ERA, in order to force a genuine concession from the capitalists. In the course of this struggle we must show the masses that only socialism can grant true democracy to women. If we don't, then the ERA will result only in a few token jobs for professional women, it will be used to split the class, and it will end up as a "sham" reform, (witness what happened to the democratic movement of Afro-Americans when there were no communist organizations capable of maintaining the momentum of that struggle, of organizing it and giving it a consistently revolutionary direction).

FASCISM

WVO is fond of saying that the ERA is a capitalist device for ushering in fascism. It is true that every bourgeois-democratic state contains within itself the seeds of fascism - this is elementary knowledge. However we don't defeat fascism by NOT fighting for democracy, we defeat fascism by utilizing the economic and political struggles of the masses to organize and lead truly mass actions which break the boundaries of bourgeois legality -- to organize revolutionary struggle. Because ONLY revolutionary struggle can prevent fascism - can beat back the fascist front groups which play upon the degenerate culture promoted by the liberals to push women "back into the home", to chain them with passivity, to confine them to domesticate slavery. (And it is not "proof" that the ERA helps usher in fascism because fascist groups use it to push "women-back-to-the-home" ideology. The fascists are going to attack ALL progressive and revolutionary demands - especially self-determination and socialism - does this mean that we don't raise them?) What is despicable and opportunist about the WVO's assertions in this regard is that they substitute facts with quotes from Dimitroff taken out of context to "prove" their assertion.

CONCLUSION

We call upon all Marxist-Leninists and other revolutionaries to take up the struggle for women's equal rights, to win the leadership of the struggle for the ERA; to expose the petty-bourgeois reformists who try to channel this struggle into petition drives and congressional pressure campaigns. Let us organize this struggle so that the masses can learn, through their own experience, HOW to fight a revolution, HOW to struggle for democracy, and WHY socialist revolution is inevitable.

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN -- FIGHT FOR THE ERA!!!
WORKERS AND OPPRESSED PEOPLES OF THE WORLD UNITE!!!