

Women, the Unions and Work, Or ...

What Is Not To Be Done

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This pamphlet has been published by the Notting Hill (a working-class district in West London — ed.) Womens Liberation Workshop group. It was written by one of our members and presented as a paper at the National Conference of Women at Manchester March 25-26, 1972. While many of us have minor or major disagreements with the paper, we feel that the discussion which it generated at the conference was of such importance to the future of the movement that it should be widely read and the discussion continue.

The demands at the end of the paper aroused most interest at the conference, and were discussed, added to and modified there. But there may have been some misunderstanding about their purpose. They are not a statement of what we want, finally, to have. They are not a plan for an ideal society, and a society based on them would not cease to be

oppressive. Ultimately the only demand which is not co-optable is the armed population demanding the end of capitalism. But we feel that at this moment these demands can be a force against what capital wants and for what we want. They are intended to mobilize women both "inside" and "outside" the women's liberation movement. They could provide a perspective which would affect decisions about local and national struggles. After discussion and modification they could become integrated and far-reaching goals which the women's movement could come to stand for. A vote taken on the final day at Manchester decided that the demands would be raised on the first day of the next conference. Many groups are planning local discussions before that time.

April 8, 1972.

This is perhaps written as an open letter to women attending this Manchester conference. It is impossible any longer to sit in the protection of a group and see the potential of the movement squandered. This was hastily written, though it represents many years' consideration. It is not meant to be the final word, not even of its author.

There are more ways than one in which the women's movement can be co-opted and be cut off from the possibilities of becoming an autonomous and revolutionary political movement. One is that we will assist capitalism to introduce and integrate women into new facets of its exploitative relations. The FINANCIAL TIMES of March 9, 1971, has made clear to those backward capitalists who have not realised it yet, how useful we can be.

...The thousands of trained girls who come out of the universities every year are desperately anxious to escape from the triple trap of teaching, nursing, or shorthand-typing...

Many of these girls are clearly of high ability, and they constitute a pool from which skilled middle management could be drawn. They would be as hard working and conscientious as only a grateful outsider could be, and it is conceivable that, in spite of the equal pay legislation, they might not cost as much as male equivalents, at least in the first instance. We will use such women, in increasing numbers, when we realise that they exist and feel able to recognise their qualities. Until then, a good deal of talent that is costing a lot of money to train in our universities will continue to be wasted, and British industry will have failed to see a source of renewed energy and vitality that is before its very eyes.

This use of rebellion, to co-opt the most articulate minority for the purpose of developing capital, with "renewed energy and vitality", is not new and not confined to women. It is the overriding principle of capitalist development. The ex-colonial world whom the British "educated" to self-government, for example, is ruled by "grateful outsiders". We need to examine how we are to be "used" closely and carefully if we are to prevent ourselves from organising only to assist capitalism to be less backward and in the process further enslaving ourselves, rather than organising to destroy it which is the only possible process of liberation.

Another, but connected, way of co-option has in some measure already taken place, and its agent has been left organisations. They have effectively convinced many of us that if we wish to move to working class women it must be either through them or, more pervasively, through their definitions of the class, their orientations and their kind of actions. It is as though they have stood blocking an open door. They challenge the validity of an autonomous women's movement either directly or (by treating women, a specially exploited section of the class, as marginal) indirectly. For them the "real" working class is white, male and over thirty. Here racism, male supremacy and age supremacy have a common lineage. They effectively want

to make us auxiliary to the "general" struggle — as if they represented the generalisation of the struggle; as if there could be a generalised struggle without women, without men joining with women for women's demands.

A major issue on which we have swallowed their orientation and been co-opted to defeat our own movement has been on the question of unionising women.

We are told that we must bring women to what is called a "trade union consciousness". This phrase is Lenin's and it comes from a pamphlet called "What is to be done." In many ways it is a brilliant pamphlet, but it was written in the early days of the Russian movement, in 1902. Lenin learnt from the workers and peasants of Russia in 1905 and 1917 and repudiated a good deal of what he wrote before these two revolutions. Left people do not speak of Lenin's labor conclusions, and in my view much of what passes for left theory (and practice) today is pre-1902. In 1972 this is a serious charge, and I think it can be proved. They can read Lenin and quote him. But unlike Lenin, they are not able to learn from the actions that workers take.

The most obvious recent action is undoubtedly the miners' strike. I believe many women in the movement have been awoken by this great working class event. Class action shakes all sections of the population in days or weeks when nothing else has moved them for years. We have all had a leap in consciousness as a result of the action of the class. Therefore what we consider possible is expanded. This is the immediate reason for our restlessness. We are not satisfied any more to stand aside and let the world go by. After three years of our movement, Northern Ireland, Zimbabwe and then this strike. We want to do something, but not just anything. We want to build a movement which is at once political and new, one which speaks specifically to the needs of women.

But what has been the basis of this tremendous demonstration of power of the class? After all, this is not the first big strike in the recent period in Britain. The postmen, the dustmen, the electricity workers and many others have demonstrated in action their will to fight. What distinguished the miners is that they didn't depend on their

unions but on their own self-organisation and methods of struggle. More than once during the strike, the union tried to dictate the terms of struggle. For example, when the union asked workers to man safety crews, or tried to discourage them from violent defence of picket lines, or stood in the way of the women organising independently. But the mining community went its own autonomous way. As a result, it won, among other reasons because in this way it won other workers to its cause.

This is not the first attempt at autonomous class action, but it is the first major success. Almost every recent national strike has been lost or at least drawn because workers allowed or could not prevent their union from "leading" it. Pilkington is the most striking case. And we must remember that 90% of all strikes are unofficial, either in spite of or against the unions.

Now at this point, where workers are beginning to wrest from unions control over their own struggle, we are invited to bring women into the unions where they will acquire "trade union consciousness".

What has been the role of trade unions specifically in relation to women?

1. They have helped to maintain unequal rates of pay despite the brave attempts by women (and some men) trade unionists to give this issue priority. As a matter of fact, once unions ask for a percentage wage rise, and not the same rise for all, they not only confirm inequality of wages but further widen the gap between men and women — and of course between men and men too. Ten percent of £10 = £11. Ten percent of £20 = £22. To them that hath a bit more shall be given a bit more...

They have never organised a struggle for equal pay. In the two great equal pay strikes we know about — and there are plenty we don't know about — the women acted independently of the unions. During the Leeds seamstresses' strike the union wrote to the company and told them not to give in to the women. The women had to fight two governors by busting the windows of the union offices.

At Daganham (auto plants — ed.) when the seat cover sewers want out, of course there was no attempt by the

union to generalise (that is, bring the men out in support) a strike which took place because the union had turned their backs on the women. The shop stewards, at the crucial meeting with the Minister of Employment and Productivity, renounced upgrading — which was the demand of the women — and settled for a wage rise which was 8% below the average male pay.

2. Grading is the basis for unequal pay where men and women work together. The unions take for granted job categories which have kept women lower paid and will continue to under the equal pay act. Even more, they worry that equal pay for women might “disturb” the wage differentials among different grades of men. The GUARDIAN of 6 September 1971 quotes Jack Peel, general secretary of the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers, talking to an employer, one Eric Booth. Eric says, “If we’re not careful this could be very expensive for us.” But Jack is more far-seeing. He says, “We could easily upset the men; upset their differentials. The way to avoid this is to go gently along.” The question of equal pay is not only about the double exploitation of women and young people. It is about the way capital has carved up the class into grades and corresponding wage rates so that groups of workers see their interests as different from other groups — for example, man in relation to woman.

3. They have not tried very hard to get us into unions. The Night Cleaners were in the degrading position of having to embarrass the T & G (Transport and General Workers Union — ed.) publicly in order to get “taken in”. We’re not straightforward like men, you see. We have all these problems of kids and husbands and extreme exploitation. They don’t really want us in the unions, although the dues are useful and we don’t compete for their union jobs.

Yet note: if there are a rash of strikes or sit-ins for equal pay or for anything else, the unions will be falling over backwards to bring women in. What else does capital have to control workers when they move? How else can they get us to participate in our own exploitation? Who else would we trust but an organization, a movement, formed by us to unite with other workers? And if we are

not depending on unions, who else would we depend on but ourselves and other workers? That would be dangerous — for unions and government. It would not be surprising if they were at this moment planning campaigns to recruit women in areas where they have been effectively militant, and planning also to come to our movement for help. Who can do their recruiting among women better than other women!

4. But for those of us who are deprived of wages for our work, who are housewives and do not have jobs outside the home, unions don't know we exist. When capital pays husbands they get two workers, not one. The unions are organizations which are supposed to protect (some) workers in (some) work institutions. Waged workers have organised unions (not the other way round, by the way — workers organise unions, not union workers) and have organised them to deal with their paid work situation. A housewife's work situation is the home, and every woman who does paid work (except the rich) also does unpaid work, is also a housewife. Yet when husband and father and brother are taking strike decisions which we have to support, we have no part in deciding the kind of action or the issues on which we fight. We get very little for ourselves — if we win, not even some of the credit. Has anybody pointed out how much every strike of men is dependent on the support of women? The unions ensure that the struggle is segregated and women can participate only as auxiliaries. Remember "Salt of the Earth"? In order for the women to be brought actively into the strike and win it, they had to adjourn the union meeting and have a meeting of the whole community instead. That's where it's at, on a national and international level.

5. Until recently the capitalist class with the help of unions had convinced men that if they got a rise in pay they got a rise in standard of living. That's not true, and women always knew it. They give men a pay packet on Friday and take it back from us on Saturday at the shops. We have to organise the struggle for the other side of wages — against inflation — and that can only be done outside the unions, first because they only deal with the money we get and not

with what we have immediately to give back; and second because they limit their fight — such as it is — only to that workplace where you get wages for being there, and not where your work involves giving the money back.

It is not simply that they don't organise the shoppers; it is that the union prevents such organisation, by fragmenting the class into those who have wages and those who don't. The unemployed, the old, the ill, children and housewives are wageless. So the unions ignore us and thereby separate us from each other and from the waged. That is, they structurally make a generalised struggle impossible. This is not because they are bureaucratised; this is why. Their functions are to mediate the struggle in industry and keep it separate from struggles elsewhere. Because the most concentrated potential power of the class is at the point of direct production, the unions have convinced the wageless that only at that point can a struggle be waged at all. This is not so, and the most striking example has been the organisation of the Black community. Blacks, like women, cannot limit themselves to a struggle in direct production. And Blacks, like women, see the function of unions within the class writ large in their attitudes to them. For racism and sexism are not aberrations of an otherwise powerful working class weapon.

You will see by now that I believe in order to have our own politics we must make our own analysis of women and therefore our own analysis of the whole working class struggle. We have been taking so much for granted that happens to be around, and restricting, segregating ourselves to speaking and writing about women, that it looks like we are only supposed to analyse and understand women after others (men) have analysed the class "in general" — excluding us. This is to be male-dominated in the profoundest sense. Because there is no class "in general" which doesn't include us and all the wageless.

I think that some of us who have refused to relate women's struggle to the class struggle have done this in self-defense, in order to get away from the left analysis of class which left us out completely (and as I have tried to show,

was a barrier to men workers carrying out struggle independent of unions).

In turn some women have been forced to stay in or join left organisations and suffer continuous humiliation in them in order not to be disconnected from class politics.

Another result of the denial of an autonomous role for the women's movement has been the women who see themselves only as supportive, this time of women and not of men. If we support women's struggles that is a step forward, but if we make no independent contribution, we are either unwilling or unable to use and share what the movement has caused us to learn. Faced with the elitism of the left, this patronising has seemed to some women the only alternative.

For all these women the autonomous politics of women's liberation is the only meaningful alternative. Until we create that, we will continue to snipe at each other, and always as a reaction to what men are doing.

Now the first thing that will pop into the heads of some of us is the benefit to be derived from unions. There is no doubt that certain slave conditions are done away with when a factory is organised, and usually when workers in factories organise, they organise into unions (or against them). It seems the only alternative to slavery. The whole history of the class is bound up with this institution. But it is the way workers get unions formed, organising together and almost always going on strike, that abolishes the slave conditions, not the unions. It is their power that brings the union in and it is their power that abolishes slave conditions. The union has become a symbol of this power and has exploited this image and this tradition so as to channel, direct and, where possible, smother the struggle, but the power is the workers'.

Secondly, if you go into a union or a non-union factory or office where both men and women are working, you'll almost always see that the men are not as pressed as the women. Their working speed is slower than women's; they take more time in the cloakroom, to smoke, to breathe. That also has to do, not with unions, but with power: women come into industry less powerful than men, for the obvious

reason of their manifold oppression through the patriarchy. But aside from their internalisation of the myth of female incapacity through which this patriarchy is maintained, there is another factor. They have an actual minority status in industry and they are very uncertain not only of their own capacities but of the support they will receive from men and the unions which are now identified primarily with men.

The very structure of the unions puts women off. All those rules and regulations and having to talk at meetings and having meetings at night when we are putting our children to bed and washing up, often confirm to us that we are just not up to scratch. We know these feelings well. We formed a movement because of them.

Certainly very few women in jobs or out of them feel the union can represent them as women who have not an eight-hour but at least a 16-hour day.

But if the power of the unions is the power of the class, and if unions have in essential respects been working against our interests as women and therefore against the working class, then we must organise that power, not those unions. We are in a similar dilemma with the family of the working class. I would like to quote from a forthcoming document which does not analyse women from the point of view of Marxism, but Marxism from the point of view of women (and therefore I believe of men). It comes from the Italian women's movement!*

The working class family is the more difficult point to break because it is the support of the worker, but as worker, and for that reason the support of capital. On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class — but at the woman's expense against the class itself. The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and

* WOMEN AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE COMMUNITY by Mariarosa Dalla Costa. "Radical America", Boston, Jan.-Feb. 1972.

her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he and she will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of women of the working class against the family is decisive.

The struggle of the woman in the working class against the unions is so decisive because, like the family, it protects the class at her expense (and not only hers) and at the expense of offensive action. Like the family, we have nothing to put in its place but the class acting for itself and women as integral, in fact pivotal to that class.

6. Finally there is the question of women and "unemployment". First of all, we know that only rich women are unemployed — that is, do no work. Whether or not we're in jobs, most of us work like hell. The only thing is that we are wageless if we don't formally hire ourselves out to a particular capitalist and just work in our kitchens creating and servicing workers for the capitalist class in general. It is characteristic that the unions and the labour exchanges (i.e. wage slave markets) in Scotland have made a deal not to give jobs to married women. In the explosive situation in Scotland of which the UCS (Upper Clyde Shipyard — ed.) work-in was merely an indication, they — the unions and the government — figure we can be depended upon not to "give trouble". That is how we have been used all the time, and we have to prove them wrong or fold up. This damn capitalist class and their damn unions must not be able to count on our quiescence any more over anything. They have made this deal over our heads. They will make or have made others. We are expendable.

And when in Scotland we are kept out of the wage-slave market, it is to keep men from being unemployed just at the moment and in the place where the methods of struggle of Northern Ireland may catch on. This move against women by unions and government is probably as a direct result of the attempt men workers made to take over the employment exchange at the same time as the UCS work-in was going on. That is, some workers thought that an unwork-in

was a better idea than a work-in. No need to say where the unions stand on this when they are desperately trying to shove "We want jobs" placards into workers' hands. You would think it is immoral to be disengaged from exploitation. The only thing "wrong" with unemployment is that you don't get paid.

And this is the heart of the issue. The government, acting in the interests of the capitalist class in general, has created unemployment in the hope that, instead of fighting for more pay and less work, we will be glad for the crumbs that the master lets fall from his table. So that the "country" can "progress" over our dead and dying minds and bodies. The unions tell us to worry about productivity and exports while the capitalists are busy exporting their capital all over the world, for example to South Africa (and hope, by the way, to export white unemployed workers behind it). The unions are trying to lead exactly the kind of struggle that would make Ted Heath (except for the mining community, the Northern Irish Catholic community and the Zimbabwe community) a happy man: they are demanding jobs. It is the threat of closure of the mines that the government thought would keep the mining community quiet. Instead the people from the mine areas made clear from their strike that they didn't consider spending your life in a mine or scrubbing filthy clothes and nursing people with silicosis was an ideal existence. Their strike meant that they were saying: Take your mines and shove them. They refused to beg for the right to be exploited.

But what about these women who have been deprived of the social experience of socialised work and the relative independence of their own pay packet? It is certainly not as simple in their case. I quote again from the Italian document.

...The role of housewife, beyond whose isolation is hidden social labour, must be destroyed. But our alternatives are strictly defined. Up to now, the myth of female incapacity, rooted in this isolated woman dependent on someone else's wage and therefore shaped by someone else's conscious-

ness, has been broken only by one action: the woman getting her own wage, breaking the back of personal economic dependence, making her own independent experience with the world outside the home, performing social labour in a socialised structure, whether the factory or the office, and initiating there her own forms of social rebellion along with the traditional forms of the class. The advent of the women's movement is a rejection of this alternative.

Capital itself is seizing upon the same impetus which created a movement — the rejection by millions of women of woman's traditional place — to recompose the work force with increasing numbers of women. The movement can only develop in opposition to this. It poses by its very existence and must pose with increasing articulation in action that women refuse the myth of liberation through work.

For we have worked enough. We have chopped billions of tons of cotton, washed billions of dishes, scrubbed billions of floors, typed billions of words, wired billions of radio sets, washed billions of nappies (diapers — ed.), by hand and in machines. Every time they have "let us in" to some traditionally male enclave, it was to find for us a new level of exploitation.

Here again we must make a parallel, different as they are, between underdevelopment in the Third World and underdevelopment in the metropolis — to be more precise, in the kitchens of the metropolis. Capitalist planning proposes to the Third World that it "develop"; that in addition to its present agonies, it too suffer the agony of an industrial counter-revolution. Women in the metropolis have been offered the same "aid". But those of us who have gone out of our homes to work be-

cause we had to or for extras or for economic independence have warned the rest: inflation has riveted us to this bloody typing pool or to this assembly line, and in that there is no salvation.

We must refuse the development they are offering us. But the struggle of the working woman is not to return to the isolation of the home, appealing as this sometimes may be on Monday morning; any more than the housewife's struggle is to exchange being imprisoned in a house for being clinched to desks or machines, appealing as this sometimes may be compared to the loneliness of the 12th storey apartment...

The challenge to the women's movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation. This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women's movement.

This is the most dangerous co-option because it is massive, and it was planned some time ago. A confidential report on the employment of women and young persons under 18 years (revealed in *SOCIALIST WORKER*, December 21, 1968) was prepared by the National Joint Advisory Committee, with representatives from the Confederation of British Industries, the nationalised industries, the Ministry of Labour and—guess who?—the TUC (Trades Union Congress—ed.) The report stated:

with the constant introduction of expensive new equipment, shift working will no doubt continue to increase so as to maximise the economic return from capital investment involved and indeed before committing capital to the purchase of such machinery employers want to be assured that shift

working will be possible, so as to ensure an adequate return.

Can we now understand the equal pay act which gives what they call equal pay on the terms that we work shifts?

The report discussed Section 68 of the Factory Act requiring that all women and young persons in a factory have their breaks at the same time. Section 68, it says, "denies to employers the flexibility in arranging the hours of their women and young persons...so essential in present day conditions." So much for capital's planlessness, and our peripheral "use" in industry.

Here is where the movement can be made or broken. We can be the modern suffragettes, only more dangerous, since where they invited women to vote and be free, we will be inviting them to achieve freedom through work.

No doubt there are times when we would be failing in our duty if we did not support and even encourage women to demand jobs, especially where they are isolated from women's industries, so that sweat shops are the only places within miles where a woman can earn enough money to cover the inflation and to avoid having to degrade herself by asking her husband for money for tights. But if we limit ourselves to this, if this is our programme and not just a tactic to help mobilize women in particular situations, all we are doing is organising women to be more efficiently and mercilessly exploited.

The question is: what in outline are the alternatives, in organisation and in demands?

First, the level of organisation of women is low. This is the most important reason why women in the movement are impelled to bring women into unions. Here is an institution already functioning and "experienced" — as we are not — which does not have to be built from the ground up. To think in terms of building organisations without traditions (except the traditions of the struggle itself) is to break from other traditions which, among other things, prevented a revolutionary women's movement for centuries. Independent organisation — independent of every section of the establish-

ment, is difficult to consider, let alone create, when thousands of women are not in motion.

But the picture is not as gloomy as it appears. There have been dozens if not hundreds of equal pay strikes. The Claimants Union (an organisation similar to the welfare rights organizations in the U.S. — ed.) is gaining in strength and has at its core unsupported mothers. And most recently, the women of the mine areas made the first attempt to organise independently. In addition, if we are not blinded by a "trade union consciousness" ourselves, we can see women even in the worst jobs and the most unorganised factories waging their struggle in completely new ways. Here is the DAILY SKETCH, January 18, 1971.

Thousands of girls quit humdrum factory jobs because they get fed up being treated like "robots".

They complain of monotonous and impersonal bosses.

The girls become frustrated because the jobs they do make little demand on their abilities and leave no room for personal satisfaction.

These were the main points of a survey by Bradford University into why 65 per cent of women quit their jobs in the electronics industry within a few months.

(You see who the universities are working for.)

We are not only victims; we are rebels too. The absenteeism of women is notorious. Instead of workers control of production, their action is more like workers control of the struggle, to hell with their production.

So that the first barrier to independent organisation, the supposed apathy of women, is not what has been assumed. If we begin to look with women's eyes, respecting what women do and not measuring them as men do, we will see a wealth of rebellion against and refusal of women's work and the relationships and roles they generate.

This is not always organised rebellion and refusal. Well then, let's organise it. The unions don't; they sit on its head.

There appear to be two levels of demands, the issues which arise on a local level, and the general demands which the movement comes to stand for. In reality our movement has suffered from an unnatural separation between the two. The Four Demands we marched for last year have been on the whole unconnected with individual group activity (in part at least because of the barrenness of those demands).

Our concern must be demands with which the movement articulates in few words the breadth of its rejection of the oppression and exploitation of women. The tension between a local struggle and the stated principles of the movement does not vanish but within each local demand, which mobilizes women wherever they are, the struggle loses its sporadic, provincial and disconnected character. The demands must raise possibilities of new kinds and areas of action in each local situation from the beginning, and always keep the fundamental issues before our eyes. There is much more to be said about this, but better to move to the proposed demands.

1. WE DEMAND THE RIGHT TO WORK LESS. A shorter work week for all. Why should anybody work more than 20 hours a week? Housewives are hesitant to ask men after a week of at least 40 grinding hours to see after their own children and their own underwear. Yet women do just that, for themselves and for men. When women are threatened with redundancies, the struggle must be for a shorter work week. (Maybe men will take our lead for a change.)

2. WE DEMAND A GUARANTEED INCOME FOR WOMEN AND FOR MEN WORKING OR NOT WORKING, MARRIED OR NOT. If we raise kids, we have a right to a living wage. The ruling class has glorified motherhood only when there is a pay packet to support it. We work for the capitalist class. Let them pay us, or else we can go to the factories and offices and put our children in their father's laps. Let's see if they can make Ford cars and change nappies at the

same time. WE DEMAND WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK. All housekeepers are entitled to wages (men too).

3. It is in this context that WE DEMAND CONTROL OF OUR BODIES. If even birth control were free, would that be control? And if we could have free abortions on demand is that control? What about the children we want and can't afford? We are forced to demand abortion and sterilization as we have been forced to demand jobs. Give us money and give us time, and we'll be in a better position to control our bodies, our minds and our relationships. Free birth control, free abortions for whoever wants them (including our sisters from abroad who are denied this right — sisterhood is international). WE DEMAND THE RIGHT TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN.

But childbearing is not the only function of our bodies that capital controls. At work we make them do what they don't want to do: repeated jerks on an assembly line, constant sitting or standing, breathing fumes and dirt. Work is often painful and dangerous. It is always uncomfortable and tiring. After work your body is too numb for you to feel it as something you can enjoy. For this reason it cannot develop sexually. Our physical feeling is further destroyed by the limited kinds of sexuality and the shallow relationships this society promotes, and by the scarcity of times and places where we can make love. Our bodies become a tool for production and reproduction and nothing else.

4. WE DEMAND EQUAL PAY FOR ALL. There is a rate for girls and a rate for boys and a rate for women and a rate for men and a rate for "skilled" and a rate for "unskilled" and a rate in the North and a rate in the South. Whoever works deserves a minimum wage, and that minimum must be the rate of the highest grade.

5. WE DEMAND AN END TO PRICE RISES, including tax, rent, food and clothing. There is a battle brewing on housing. As usual, with tenants' struggles, women are going to be at the heart: they are the ones who will refuse the rent collector when he knocks in a rent strike. But our inter-

vention can help guarantee that the women will also lead it, instead of being confined to making the tea in the back of the hall while the men make speeches in front.

6. WE DEMAND FREE COMMUNITY CONTROLLED NURSERY AND CHILD CARE. We are entitled to a social existence without having to take another job out of our homes. Mothers too have a right to work less. Young children as well as women are imprisoned in their homes. But we don't want them to go to a State institution instead. Children, women and men must be able to learn from each other and break the ghetto existence to which they are each confined. We will then begin to destroy the State's authority over our children and our possession of them.

In the same way as children are to be wrested from the State, so old people, and the mentally and physically ill must come back to the community's care. We need time and we need money to destroy the prisons in which our children, our grandparents and our sick people are confined.

How do we organise a struggle around these demands? As I say, the Claimants Union has already begun. But the low level of organisation of women generally means that there is plenty hard work to be done.

We begin by uniting what capital has divided. If men have not yet learnt to support the equal pay fight which we have made, it is because their privileges over us — based on the dubious "privilege" of the wage itself — have blinded them to their class interests. They have always paid dearly for not uniting with us, by being thrown out of jobs to be replaced by "cheaper" female labour. We may still have to confront not only employers, unions and government but men too when we want equal pay. Equal pay for all may win them over to demanding equal pay also among themselves as well as with us. The battle for parity in auto is the class finding its way to just such a struggle.

We can organize women where they work for wages, where they shop, where they live and work. Women from

many industrial estates have shopping areas very near where they shop in their dinner hour. They often live close by. We can begin by leafletting in all three places, aiming to organise for their most pressing problems which are hours of work, wages, inflation, child care and slavery. Housewives can go to the SS (Social Security — ed.) offices and demand money, as the women and children from the mine areas did — we need not wait for the men to strike, we can ask them to strike to support what we are doing.

It is possible that women will feel too weak (or we will) to act independently of unions (though our job is to emphasise their potential strength), and there may be pressure on them from many sources — especially employers — for them to go into unions once they take action. At this point it is far from decisive. If we help get them moving on their demands, even what they can get from the unions will be greater. They gain confidence and experience; we all do, together. We can have strikes against inflation, rent rises, shift work for women and for men. We can offer a social existence to housewives other than another job — we can offer them the struggle itself.

Of course this is much easier said than done, though the situation in this country is changing so rapidly that every day more becomes possible. This is meant to begin a discussion of these possibilities, but on our terms. Nor is this anything like a complete picture of what is taking place in Britain today (or anywhere else), either among workers, or in board rooms, government offices or TUC headquarters. But it is clear to me and to others too I think that the time to make the leap from all that we have learnt in the small group discussions to political activity has come. We must not allow what we know is the female experience to be translated into the secondhand politics of “trade union consciousness”, which has been presented to us as the only viable alternative. Goodbye to all that. When 20% of the women of a mainly women’s factory don’t turn up for work on Monday, they are many years beyond the trade union struggle, in fact its mortal enemy. They are struggling not only for better conditions in which to be exploited but against exploitation, against work itself. We in the women’s

movement should be the last people to believe or act upon the absurd notion that women are incapable of leaping beyond the oppressive institutions which have trapped men. Because we have been ignored and excluded by these institutions it is precisely us who are in the position to move beyond them.

One final point. There is a debate that goes on about most of us being middle class. And we are. As the Notting Hill SHREW put it, to have sisterhood we have to get over the myths that only working class women are oppressed or that only middle class women can know they're oppressed. Some of us, let's face it, are only in the movement because capitalism is very backward and leaves women out of government and good paying professions. They will eventually discover that capital and the FINANCIAL TIMES have plans for them. But they must not hold the rest of us back.

A hell of a lot of us are fighting capital not because it is backward but because it exists. We are increasingly aware that the oppression of all women has its roots in the indispensable work, in home, in office, in hospital and in factory, that working class women perform for capital, sometimes with low wages, most often without wages. We must get over this guilt about having wall-to-wall carpeting and a "good" education—as if they ever taught us anything except to think like them and act for them. Guilt doesn't build a political movement; it inhibits and exhausts it. For guilt becomes sacrifice and sacrifice becomes either martyrdom or bitterness—or both.

The first step in the process of our liberation at this stage is to make our own independent evaluation of the political situation in this country (and later in the world—with the help of women in other countries) on the basis of what our guts and people like those in the mining areas have told us, and then act on it. Then the fact that we are middle class will not stand in the way of waging the class struggle, but as we women define it and as only we can wage it—for the first time in a generalised way. It will take some time, but then Rome wasn't destroyed in a day.