



"The main task is, indeed, to awaken the women's class consciousness and to incorporate them into the class struggle"

- Clara Zetkin

**SOCIALIST FEMINISM:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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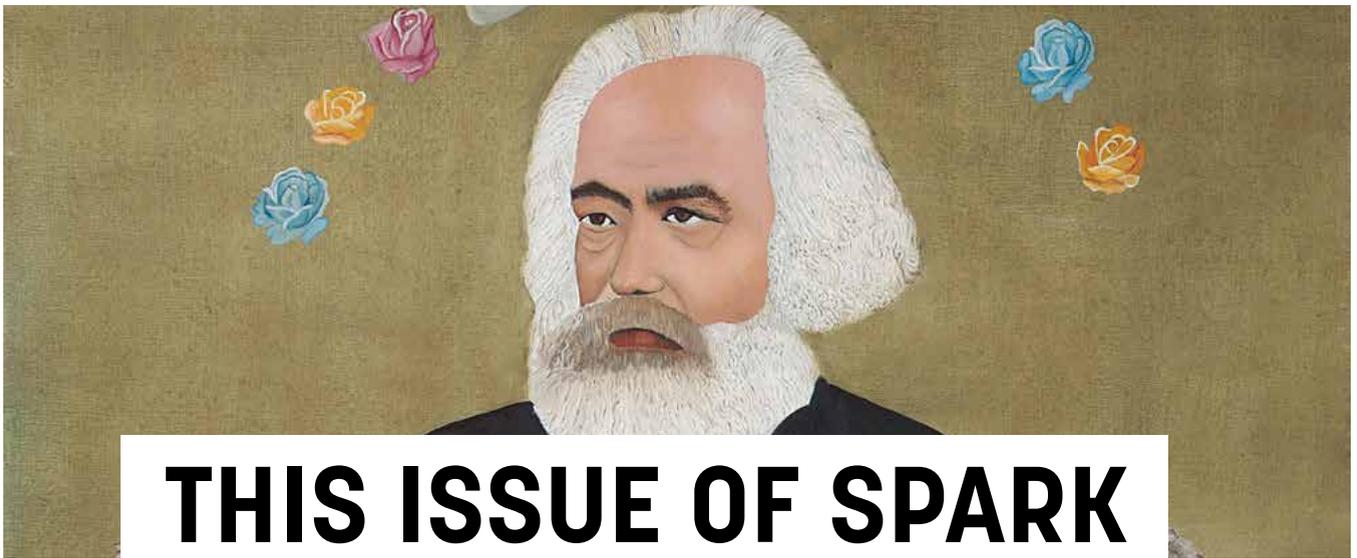
Editor: Jeanne McGuire

Cover: In August 1910, Clara Zetkin proposed the celebration of "Working Women's Day" at the Second International Socialist Women's Conference in Copenhagen. The initiative soon mobilized thousands, and in 1922, Vladimir Lenin declared March 8 as International Women's Day.

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Jeanne McGuire

This issue of Spark! leads off with an article taken from the September 1983 issue of Communist Viewpoint. In it, Joanne Naiman presents a thorough, well-researched, and articulate critique of socialist feminism. Not only does this analysis of socialist feminism remain as valid now as it did then, that analysis is also applicable to modern variants of socialist feminism – theories critical of the Marxist view that the working class is the revolutionary class. Theories which argue that newly emerging militant and radicalized sectors of society are the real carriers of revolutionary politics today. It also makes clear that as important as oppression is in capitalism, it is not, nor ever can be, as critical as exploitation in understanding social reality nor in the development of revolutionary politics, one of the main weaknesses of identity politics, no matter what the identity might be.

The article on socialist feminism is appropriate as March 8th is International Women's Day. International Women's Day became an international celebration when Clara Zetkin placed the idea before the International Socialist Women's Conference in 1910, which is why her picture is on the front of this issue of the Spark! It was socialist and communist women and parties which promoted International Women's Day and which celebrated it every year since that time. It was also the international organization of communist wom-

en – the Women's International Democratic Federation, through its status at the United Nations – which successfully moved to have March 8th declared as International Women's Day by that organization in 1975.

As capitalism faces increasing condemnation for – its wars and other forms of aggression against peoples and movements all around the world; its refusal to even try to control the crisis of climate and the environment; the growing disparities of wealth and privilege wherever it reigns; its increasing attacks on the living

standards and democratic rights of its own citizens – the efforts to convince those who begin to look for alternatives that – to quote Margaret Thatcher – “there is no alternative”

also increase. That is why the left, progressives, and communists in particular, are coming under increasing attack. The editorial in this issue challenges one form of that assault on communists and communism.

Dave McKee, editor of People's Voice begins a two-part series on the Communist approach to strategy and tactics. In this issue he outlines the theoretical basis of the strategy of the Communist Party of Canada as well as the specific assessments made as to what that theoretical basis means in the context of the Canadian experience. The next issue of Spark! will print his follow-up article on the tactics which flow from the strategy.

Included as well is an article from Socialist Voice,

the journal of the Communist Party of Ireland from September 1, 2025, with respect to issues of immigrants and the issues that arise under capitalism. The statistics may be different, the agencies involved may have Irish names, but the issues are very much the same in Ireland as they are in Canada. The attempt by certain elements to use the issue of immigration to advance a very reactionary agenda, blaming the victims

of imperialism, poverty and war for the problems that exist is identified for what it is. Without backing away from the real problems that emerge, the article articulates a Marxist response that is as valid in Canada as it is in Ireland.

The Spark! would welcome any comments about the contents of this issue or ideas for future articles. ■

THE RISE OF DESPOSTISM

The following are excerpts from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in which Marx details the rise of despotism when the revolution of 1848 fails due to internal conflicts, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between segments within the bourgeoisie, and between the peasantry and the state. They are powerful descriptions and surprisingly, seem almost to have been written about the present Bonaparte – Trump – as he seeks a \$10B “lottery prize” from the state treasury and as he strips “the entire state machinery of its halo, profaning it and making it at once loathsome and ridiculous.”

As the executive authority which has made itself independent, Bonaparte feels it to be his task to safeguard “bourgeois order.” But the strength of this bourgeois order lies in the middle class. He poses, therefore, as the representative of the middle class and issues decrees in this sense. Nevertheless, he is somebody solely because he has broken the power of that middle class, and keeps on breaking it daily. He poses, therefore, as the opponent of the political and literary power of the middle class. But by protecting its material power he revives its political power. Thus the cause must be kept alive, but the effect, where it manifests itself, must be done away with. But this cannot happen without small confusions of cause and effect, since in their interaction both lose their distinguishing marks. New decrees obliterate the border line. Bonaparte knows how to pose at the same time as the representative of the peasants and of the people in general, as a man who wants to make the lower classes happy within the framework of bourgeois society. New decrees cheat the “true socialists”* of their governmental skill in advance. But above all, Bonaparte knows how to pose as the Chief of the Society of December 10, as the representative of the lumpen proletariat to which he himself, his entourage, his government, and his army belong, and whose main object is to benefit itself and draw California lottery prizes from the state treasury. And he confirms himself as Chief of the Society of December 10 with decrees, without decrees, and despite decrees.

This contradictory task of the man explains the contradictions of his government, the confused groping which tries now to win, now to humiliate, first one class and then another, and uniformly arrays all of them against him; whose uncertainty in practice forms a highly comical contrast to the imperious, categorical style of the government decrees, a style slavishly copied from the uncle.

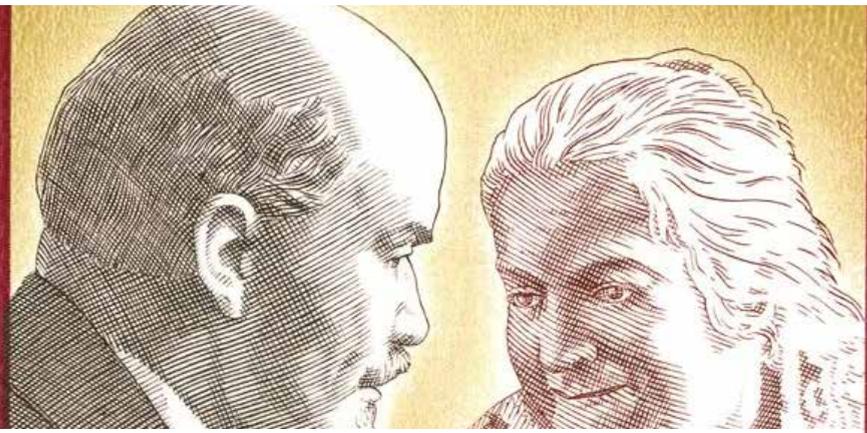
Driven by the contradictory demands of his situation, and being at the same time, like a juggler, under the necessity of keeping the public gaze on himself, as Napoleon’s successor, by springing constant surprises – that is to say, under the necessity of arranging a coup d’état in miniature every day – Bonaparte throws the whole bourgeois economy into confusion, violates everything that seemed inviolable to the Revolution of 1848, makes some tolerant of revolution and makes others lust for it, and produces anarchy in the name of order, while at the same time stripping the entire state machinery of its halo, profaning it and making it at once loathsome and ridiculous. ■

*The reference is to German or “true socialism” which was widespread in Germany in the 1840s, mostly among petty-bourgeois intellectuals. The “true socialists” – Karl Grün, Moses Hess, Hermann Kriege – substituted the sentimental preaching of love and brotherhood for the ideas of socialism and denied the need for a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Germany. Marx and Engels criticised this trend in the following works: *The German Ideology*, *Circular Against Kriege*, *German Socialism in Verse and Prose* and *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

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SOCIALIST FEMINISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Joanne Naiman

This article is excerpted from a paper presented at the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association Meetings, Vancouver, B.C., June 1983. The author kindly granted permission for its publication in Communist Viewpoint, from which this is republished.

"The 'marriage' of marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: marxism and feminism are one, and that one is marxism."¹

Thus Heidi Hartmann begins her critique of the traditional Marxist analysis of women's oppression and exploitation. This paper is an attempt to further the ongoing debate about the "marriage" of Marxist theory to Radical Feminist theory. Like Hartmann, this author feels that in the "marriage" the two frameworks have indeed become one; however, the evidence indicates that the "one" is consistently Radical Feminism, not Classical Marxism.

* * *

The social sciences, like all the sciences, attempt to understand the world in order to make predictions and hopefully gain increasing control over it. This, of course, requires a rigorous and systematic analysis of phenomena, incorporating both the descriptive (empirical) and the analytical (theoretical). Theories explaining objective reality become part of what Thomas Khun termed "paradigms" or frameworks for analysis. The paradigm used determines what questions are asked, what concepts are used, which problems are studied, and ultimately what conclusions are drawn.

Jaggar and Rothenberg Struhl² have identified five

theoretical frameworks which are used in analyzing sexual inequality: Conservative, Liberal, Radical Feminist, Classical Marxist, and Socialist Feminist. Obviously these five frameworks are not equally correct in their analysis and conclusions. It is therefore of crucial importance for those who see sexism as a social problem to assess which of these analytical frameworks best explains the root causes, consequences, and most importantly the means of eliminating this condition. The value of any theoretical framework will also lie in its inclusiveness and generality, in its ability to integrate various theories and laws into as comprehensive an analysis as possible. This does not imply that an adequate theory must be unduly complex. Quite the opposite is, in fact, the case:

Scientific theorists employ a related *principle of parsimony* (often referred to as Occam's razor) which decrees that complex explanations methods should be replaced by simpler formulations wherever possible ... Simplicity, however, does not necessarily connote ease of comprehension. As employed in this principle, simplicity refers to a preference for the smallest necessary number of independent elements to be embodied in a theory or procedure.³

Some authors have recently attacked science and the scientific approach for being male-dominated and therefore of limited value to women's liberation.⁴ However, this argument is premised on the erroneous

assumption that science and rational thought are in *themselves* oppressors of women, created by men as a means of attaining power. However, it is not science itself, but who *controls* it which determines the uses (or abuses) of science at any given time. Clearly, in a capitalist system the owning class will largely determine the uses to which science is put.

For women to reject the tried and tested methods of science because they are male-dominated would be equivalent to parents rejecting the Salk vaccine for their children because Salk never had polio. Marx, of course, grappled with the issue of science and the scientific method. He too understood the abuses of science which were under the control of the bourgeoisie. However, he also understood that the same tools of science could be, in fact had to be, employed by the exploited and oppressed masses, not to maintain power, but to achieve liberation. If women are seriously concerned about analyzing and ultimately eliminating sexual inequality, it is clear that we must use the most developed tools at our disposal. To do otherwise would be a giant step backwards for our cause.

* * *

Socialist Feminism is the newest of the five frameworks which attempt to analyze sexual inequality, and it has, in recent years, gained increasing popularity. However, very little critical analysis of this framework has yet been attempted, and there has been a great deal of confusion regarding the distinction between this approach and the traditional Marxist analysis of sexual inequality.

It should be understood at the outset that Socialist Feminism is not a monolithic framework; writers from this perspective vary in the degree to which one would consider them (or they would consider themselves) as "socialists" or as "feminists." However, a careful examination of a wide number of articles and books written from this perspective reveals many common elements.

Whatever the differences, Socialist Feminists argue that some form of radical transformation of the whole social system is required to liberate women; they oppose the liberal or bourgeois feminist argument that full equality can be achieved for women through gradual reforms in the present system. However, Socialist Feminists argue that the two traditional "radical" frameworks, Radical Feminism and Classical Marxism, are inadequate theories for explaining and resolving sexual inequality. Socialist Feminism, then, is an attempt to

combine the "best" from each theory, while supposedly eliminating the weaknesses in both.

This paper will attempt to show that the resulting theoretical framework lacks both internal consistency and scientific validity. It will be argued that Socialist Feminism remains essentially a Radical Feminist framework, which, however, adds an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist perspective, and which utilizes Marxist categories of analysis.

Classical Marxism

Marxism, of course, is not a theory specifically about women. The tools of Marxist analysis are used to explain all elements of a social system, including the origins and nature of sexual inequality. It must also be pointed out that Classical Marxism* consists of three analytically distinct but interrelated parts: (1) a philosophical world view known as historical materialism; (2) an analysis of political economy, centering around the theory of surplus value; and 3) a series of strategies and tactics for engaging in the inevitable class struggle.⁵ [**The terms "Classical Marxism" and "Marxism" will be used interchangeably in this paper.*]

The starting point of a Marxist analysis of women's condition must begin with the way in which a given society meets its historically conditioned social needs:

The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view the final causes of all social changes and political revolution are to be sought... in changes in the mode of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch.⁶

Marxists argue that sexual inequality develops concurrent with the development of private property and the state. The key is the disappearance of communal ownership and the clan as the central unit of society and its replacement by the privatized, individual family unit which becomes the new economic unit of society. The inferior position of women has been maintained through all forms of *class* society: slave, feudal, capitalist. In each stage sexism takes on a different form appropriate to the particular mode of production, and needs of the owning class.

Sexism persists not because it is functional to *men*,

but because it is functional to a ruling class. In capitalist societies, owners of the means of production who pay wages to workers reap superprofits from the underpaid labor of women. The lower wages paid to women help keep all wages down, in the same way that lower wages paid to racial minorities keep *all* wages lower.⁷ That is, the higher paid worker is always potentially threatened with replacement by a lower paid worker. Thus the capitalist class not only gets larger profits from the underpayment of women, but they also pocket the losses to *men's* wages.

However, direct profits are not the only way the bourgeoisie benefits from the maintenance of sexism. Women's domestic role in the home serves a number of important functions, not the least of which is that a large volume of socially necessary labor is provided free of charge.⁸ Moreover, as an ideology, sexism also serves a number of important functions in capitalist systems. Not only does it serve to divide, and therefore weaken, the unity of the working class, but it also helps to reinforce the notion of a social system based on structural inequality. Women can also be used as a focus for the anger and powerlessness men feel in their world of work.

Thus, say Marxists, although gains can be made for women within our social system, the full elimination of sexual inequality can only occur with the removal of the material basis for women's inequality class antagonisms in general, and capitalism in particular. This forms the *pre-condition* for women's liberation; with the removal of the material basis, the elimination of sexism in the superstructure, such as ideology and personal relations, becomes possible.

Marxists, therefore, argue that it is essential to understand how social systems have been transformed in history in order to develop specific strategies and tactics for transforming our own society. Briefly stated, Marxists understand that: (a) societies have passed through different stages of development based on different modes of production; (b) the antagonistic and irresolvable struggle between the developing forces of production and the relatively static relations of production (concretely expressed in the form of class struggle) leads to an inevitable rupture in all class-based societies; (c) in the transformation from one social system

to another, one class, in an alliance with other sympathetic elements, will become the leading force for change because of its particular structural location; (d) the revolutionary class, which has neither the wealth nor the state power of the owning class, must utilize and gain strength through those things at its disposal: organization, discipline, and unity.

In the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, the bourgeoisie was clearly the revolutionary class, and was the leading force in the struggle for change (note that it was far from being the most oppressed sector of the population). It was the most revolutionary class, not primarily because of subjective factors, but because of objective conditions which put it in the position of being the only sector of the population which both needed to *and* was structurally able to eliminate feudal relations of production and take state power.

Although the peasantry obviously played an important role in overturning the old feudal relations of production, it could not have done so without the leadership of the bourgeoisie.

In capitalist systems, Marx and Engels argue,⁹ the working class is the most revolutionary class, again because of certain objective conditions created through the development of capitalism itself: (a) it is the labor of the working class which produces all value, and therefore it holds some potential threat to the owning class in the form of withdrawal of its labor power; (b) it has the discipline required to carry out long and protracted struggles against capital, and the organizational experience necessary to organize effectively; (c) it plays an increasing role in the development and running of the productive forces, while the owning class becomes increasingly removed from production to the point of irrelevancy; (d) it increasingly helps develop the productive forces, while the bourgeoisie as a class increasingly holds back the development of the productive forces.

In sum, then, Marxists argue that the working class is the major force for change because of the increasing need to eliminate the present ruling class, *and* because of its increasing potential ability to do so. Of course, Marxists realize that this process does not occur in a mechanical, linear fashion. The intensification of the dissemination of bourgeois ideology hinders the devel-

Although gains can be made for women within our social system, the full elimination of sexual inequality can only occur with the removal of the material basis for women's inequality class antagonisms in general, and capitalism in particular.



opment of working class consciousness, particularly in developed capitalist economies.

For Marxists, therefore, workers *as a class* have both the most to gain from the elimination of sexism, and the objective potential capacity to eliminate the conditions which give rise to and perpetuate sexual inequality. (This does not deny that individual working class males, or even at times working class organizations, may manifest sexist behavior.) Given the revolutionary potential of the working class and its potential strength in bringing about reforms within the present system, it becomes increasingly important for women to fight side by side with men to strengthen this class. As this strength increases, so, obviously does the possibility of ending capitalist productive relations, the basis for the maintenance of sexual inequality. This process is already occurring, as women who were formerly in the home are forced into or choose to enter the paid labor force, increasing both its size and potentially its unity.

To summarize, Marxists see class as the independent primary causal variable of sexual inequality, and objective conditions as the key focus in analyzing women's condition. While Marxists certainly understand the important role of subjective factors, these variables are not seen as primary. Beliefs, feelings, and values of women and about women do have an important place in understanding, and ultimately transforming, their situations, but Marxists are clear that these subjective elements themselves ultimately arise from objective conditions of any given society. In a similar manner, Marxists understand the important role played by social institutions such as the family, schools, and religious institutions in defining and maintaining women's role in societies. But again, Marxists argue that these social institutions are, in the final analysis, determined by the mode of production and the nature of class rela-

tions in any given society.

Radical Feminism

Radical Feminism* is a theoretical perspective which generally sees the biological differences between men and women as the starting point for women's oppression and exploitation. [**The term "Radical Feminism" will be used throughout the paper to identify an analytical framework; the term "Feminism" has too broad a meaning to be analytically useful.*] As a theory, Radical Feminism is not very well developed or systematic. There are many differences among writers who are labeled, or who label themselves as Radical Feminists. But while there are disagreements on the exact origins of, and therefore solutions to women's present condition, all Radical Feminists stress the fundamental nature of women's oppression. This can be interpreted in several different ways:

1. That women were, historically, the first oppressed group.
2. That women's oppression is the most wide-spread, existing in virtually every known society.
3. That women's oppression is the deepest in that it is the hardest to eradicate and cannot be removed by other social changes such as the abolition of class society.
4. That women's oppression causes the most suffering to its victims, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, although this suffering may often go unrecognized because of the sexist prejudices of both the oppressors and the victims.
5. That women's oppression, as Firestone claims, provides a conceptual model for understanding all other forms of oppression.¹⁰

Radical Feminists, then, accept at least some of the above premises, and almost all would support the first three.

In all their analyses, the universal antagonism is between the sexes, and this antagonism is first and foremost experienced within the family unit. In other words, the family unit is the primary institution which gave rise to and helps maintain sexual inequality. Since every man supposedly benefits by having women inferior to them, they are all ultimately complicit in helping maintain sexism. Some have the power to do this in the business world, education system, medical institutions, etc., but *all* men can maintain inequality in the family unit. All women are at some time in their lives part of a family unit and it is in the family unit that emotions are most intense. Therefore, Radical Feminists argue, the family is the "lynch-pin" of a sexist society, and therefore it must be the first and major focus for change.

As Firestone says, "For unless revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family, ... the tapeworm of exploitation can never be annihilated."¹¹

To Radical Feminists, therefore, "the personal is political"; that is, women must somehow alter their personal relationships with men which form the basis for the traditional family structure which is the key to their oppression.

All Radical Feminists agree that the collective of "women" is the main force for liberating women thus the bond of sisterhood. The argument here is that since all women have experienced a common oppression, they therefore share a common interest in eliminating it. The role of Radical Feminist organizations must be to make women aware of the common oppression which they experience "consciousness-raising" is thus a key method for social change. The focus for women must first be on their subjective responses to their condition of oppression, particularly in relation to the family and sexuality, in order to become aware of their common enemy – men. However, aside from personal solutions, which it is assumed will "spread" throughout the entire society, there are no clear directions for structural transformations of the present social system.

* * *

Although Radical Feminism as a theory is appealing in its directness, it is replete with factual and analytical errors. The notion that men have always exploited and oppressed women is not supported by anthropological evidence. If we go back to the earliest form of society, hunter and gatherer societies, we find a very broad range of patterns of gender relations. The crucial element in understanding these patterns is cultural adaptation for survival rather than biological necessity. The Radical Feminist position errs by equating a division of labor by sex, which is evidenced in all societal forms, with sexual inequality. However, a division of labor does not automatically infer inequality. As long as the participants are equal with regard to ownership of the means of production and the results of their labor, where all able members of the community contribute to production, then there can be no notion of one group having power over another. Such was the case hunter and gatherer systems, a form in which our species has lived for over 90 per cent of its existence:

Our most accurate generalization about the relative statuses of men and women in foraging societies as a whole is that the worlds of the sexes are separate but equal. In other words, because of the nature of subsistence among hunters and gatherers, the sexual di-

vision of labor is sharply drawn... In the majority of foraging societies, it is not the tasks assigned to the sexes that are ranked, but rather the relative proficiency with which they are performed... As such, both women and men have the potential for greatness, for special talent, for charisma, for respect in daily life of the community, and for wisdom in old age.¹²

Many anthropologists argue that the sexual division of labor may well have been created to guarantee the interdependence of the sexes (an obvious necessity for the survival of any society), not to create supremacy of one sex over the other.¹³ It was only after a social surplus developed and the means of production and social product came to be appropriated by one particular group (class) that we can accurately begin to speak of antagonistic relations of production and exploitation.

The Radical Feminist notion of the bond of sisterhood also infers that men as a group benefit from the inferior position of women, which then explains why men support the maintenance of sexual inequality. At first glance this seems self-evident. All men benefit from having women perform domestic labor for them, raising their children, etc. Moreover, men as a group have more job opportunities than women, get higher pay, fill more administrative positions, etc. But let us examine the *losses* men suffer as a result of women's inferior position. Most important, men lose out in dollars and cents terms. As mentioned above this is because women's lower wages keep *all* wages down. In addition, most men are members of family units; if women are underpaid, the total wage packet of that family unit is lowered.

The unequal power relationship in the home is also oppressive for some men. For those who are the sole income earners in the family, there are constant pressures of being able to provide for their family. In this situation job mobility is restricted and worker activism restrained. A man is less likely to protest about poor working conditions if he has a wife and children to support. In an effort to provide adequately for their families and fulfil role expectations, men often work overtime, and even take on one or two "extra" jobs. In general, male role expectations are oppressive to men.

When we examine the consequences of sexual inequality for both women and men, it becomes increasingly apparent that not everyone is equally affected. That is, it is the men and women of the working class who suffer in the most real and direct ways from the inferior position of women.

It becomes clear, then, that women and men workers

share more in common than members of the same sex with different class interests. To presume that Margaret Thatcher and a woman on the shop floor share more in common than that same woman and the man standing next to her on the line is, of course, ludicrous. Certainly all women *do* share some forms of oppression in common. However, in contradiction to the Radical Feminist position, sex cannot be the prime variable, and therefore any formulations for change on such a basis cannot help but be misdirected. Ultimately, in fact, their pitting of male against female plays directly into the hands of those who serve to benefit most from women's exploitation and oppression – the capitalist ruling class.

The Radical Feminist focus on "consciousness raising," the subjective experience of being female, is also problematic. The process of "consciousness raising" does play an important role in making women aware that their problems have a social origin. However, this process alone does not necessarily lead to any ability to fully analyze and solve the problem. Few of us would deny that personal experience *may* spark an individual's interest in a particular topic. But this is quite different from saying that one's personal experience is primary in coming to understand a particular situation; nor does personal experience automatically lead to a clear understanding of the condition being experienced. The subjectivism of the Radical Feminist approach is, of course, totally unscientific.



Socialist Feminism

If we now return to Socialist Feminism we are faced with an intriguing question: How does one unite two theories with totally opposing positions – the one arguing that class is the primary variable in analyzing women's condition, with the economic base and objec-

tive conditions as the key focus, and the other arguing that sex is the primary variable with the key focus on elements of the superstructure and subjective states? Socialist Feminists argue that *both* sex and class are primary variables; patriarchy and capitalism interact in such a way as to reinforce each other. Thus, the liberation of women can only come about with the elimination of both; the economic infrastructure (exploitative class relations) and elements of the superstructure (sexist beliefs and values, personal relationships and feelings, and social institutions such as the family) must be attacked with equal vigor. Patriarchy and social class must simultaneously be eliminated in the creation of a new, non-sexist social system.

In fact, a careful examination of writings from the Socialist Feminist perspective reveals an interesting point: Not only are they unable to demonstrate in any scientific way that sex and class are independent primary variables, but in fact, they ultimately conclude that sex is the primary variable; that is, like Radical Feminists, Socialist Feminists argue that the division of society by sex is prior to and more important than the division by class.

In "A View of Socialist Feminism,"¹⁴ the authors argue that "as Feminists we see sexism as a primary focus, we fight against all forms and facets of sexism." Later the authors state:

1. Sexism has a life of its own. It has existed throughout human history, under every economic system.
2. Capitalism determines the particular forms of sexism in a capitalist society. The subjugation of women contributes to capitalist domination of society.

Dorothy Smith in her pamphlet, *Feminism and Marxism: A Place to Begin, A Way to Go* argues:

When we examine it [the claim for unity of the working class] from a feminist viewpoint, what begins to emerge is a built-in complicity within Marxist thinking and within the working class itself with the institutions by which the ruling class dominates society. It is an alliance across class and among men against women... It is a division which in fact aligns men in this respect on the other side of the class struggle, that is, on the side of the ruling class.¹⁵

Other comments, such as the ones below, confirm that Socialist Feminism as a theory sees sex as the primary antagonism:

We can usefully define patriarchy as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. Though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races, or ethnic groups have

different places in the patriarchy, they also are united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women; they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination ... Men are dependent on one another (despite their hierarchical ordering) to maintain their control over women.¹⁶

It is in the social system that we find the public aspects of patriarchy: the control of society – of the economy, polity, religion, etc. – by men collectively, who use that control to uphold the rights and privileges of the collective male sex as well as individual men. The husband's family-centered control over his wife's daily labor is upheld by the publicly-centered monopolization of jobs, law, property, knowledge, etc., by men.¹⁷

Similar statements can be found in numerous other writers.¹⁸ In all the above cases, in spite of the use of Marxist terminology, and in spite of an anti-capitalist sentiment, men are seen as the ultimate cause of sexual inequality.

It is clear, then, that one cannot, in fact, combine two opposing theories without violating the principles of at least one of them.

Moreover, in terms of method, Socialist Feminist theory again shows its general sympathies with the Radical Feminist approach. Subjective feelings are emphasized over objective conditions. For most writers the starting point for analysis of sexual inequality is seen as the personal life of women; theory intrinsically arises and develops out of personal experiences:

The practice of small-group consciousness-raising with its stress on examining and understanding experience and on connecting personal experience to the structures which define women's lives – is the clearest example of the method basic to feminism. Through this practice women have learned that it was important to build their analysis from the ground up, beginning with their own experiences... Women drew connections between their personal experiences and political generalities about the oppression of women; indeed they used their personal experience to develop those generalities.¹⁹

In a similar manner Rowbotham writes:

The assumption is that there is not a single correctness which can be learned off by heart and passed on by poking people with it. It is rather that we know our feelings and ideas move and transform themselves in relation to other women. We all need to express and contribute. Our views are valid because they come from within us and not because we hold a received correctness.²⁰

As mentioned earlier, this methodological approach is totally unscientific, and the emphasis on women's subjective experiences alone cannot lead to the elimination of sexual inequality.

Like the traditional attempts to "revise" Marxism,



Socialist Feminist writers, while claiming to be Marxist, ignore the basic underlying premises of the theory. This begins, of course, with their position that sex, not class, is the key determining variable regarding sexual inequality. It extends even further, however. Because of their emphasis on sex as the primary social antagonism, and because of their emphasis on subjective over objective factors, the Socialist Feminists tend to focus their analyses on the two elements of the superstructure where women experience their oppression most personally – sexuality and the institution of the family:

The right to determine our own sexuality, to control when or if we want to give birth, and to choose who and how we want to love are *central* in both women's liberation and gay liberation.²¹ [emphasis added]

Briskin states:

Women's oppression is not simply a function of a free-floating set of sexist ideas; rather it is firmly rooted in the material conditions of women's lives, primarily in the institution of the family.²²

Mitchell²³ incorporates four elements to be used in the analysis of women's condition: Reproduction of Children, Sexuality, the Socialization of Children, and Production. Only the last element is not part of the family and sexuality.

Eisenstein also places emphasis on super-structural elements:

The study of women's oppression, then, must deal with both sexual and economic material conditions if we are to understand oppression, rather than merely understand economic exploitation. The historical materialistic method must be extended to incorporate women's relations to the sexual division of labor and society as producer and reproducer as well as to incorporate the ideological formulation of this relationship.²⁴

Under the pretext that traditional Marxism is too narrow, too limiting, too deterministic, Socialist Feminists "expand" the Marxist framework. Like others

who have long been making the same claim, however, they drastically change it, and in so doing, they remove its scientific character.

That the Socialist Feminists draw only on certain limited elements of Marxist theory indicates their lack of understanding of the essence of Marxism. One does not dip into a grab-bag of Marxist ideas and pick them out willy-nilly. Marxism is both a coherent theoretical framework and a mode of analysis, and if one does not accept its most basic premises, then one is hardly a "Marxist," even if one uses terms such as "capitalism," "imperialism," or "alienation." To stress the primacy of personal experience and the unspoken tie of sisterhood is to move out of the realm of science and into that of metaphysics.

That Socialist Feminists are attempting to mix the unmixable becomes clear when Socialist Feminists try to formulate proposals for change. While they admit capitalism is a major contributing factor to sexual inequality, they refuse to acknowledge the economic base as primary. In practice, they focus on the superstructural elements of our society, particularly the family; subjective rather than objective elements are emphasized, with sexist ideology, culture and personal relations central to their analysis and focus for change. And while the term "socialism" is used with great regularity, no clear proposals for how to achieve that goal are presented vanguard parties and liberation movements are criticized for being undemocratic and sexist, the working class and its organizations are also criticized for being sexist, and extant socialist societies are criticized for retaining elements of patriarchy in their super-structures. While Socialist Feminists can offer a vision of a future egalitarian, non-sexist society, they are unable to develop a systematic analysis of the process of achieving that goal. Although Socialist Feminist writers have been exceedingly prolific in the last 10 or so years, none of their writings offer clear solutions to the problem. One author writes that "... we have come to agree on the questions that need to be asked, though we still argue about the answers."²⁵ This inability to formulate concrete proposals for change is clearly an indication of the weaknesses inherent in this framework.

An examination of the socialist feminist critique of Classical Marxism

A central theme of almost all Socialist Feminist literature is an extensive critique of Classical Marxism

as a framework for explaining sexual inequality. While these writers claim to be "improving on" and combining two "weaker" theories, they in fact show a rather different approach to each of the two theories: Radical Feminism is usually lauded for the new insights it has provided for social analysis and methodology (if criticized it is usually for its incompleteness), while Classical Marxism is generally criticized at length, not for its incompleteness, but for its *errors*. As with the theory itself, these criticisms are in no way new; nonetheless it is important that we examine and respond to the criticisms made of Marxist theory.

Criticism #1: Marxism is too "simplistic"; it is too deterministic, too reductionist.

A charge that has been leveled at Classical Marxism for over 100 years is that it is "simplistic," that it reduces all social phenomena to a single element – economics. This accusation seems to confuse simplisticness with simplicity.

As mentioned earlier, science *seeks* simplicity; the more developed a theory, the fewer the number of independent elements. The Marxist position, then, should be seen not as simplistic, but rather as a highly developed theoretical framework with a wide degree of inclusiveness. (Few people would argue that $E=mc^2$ is a simplistic view of our physical universe!) And again it must be pointed out that for the Marxist to argue that the *ultimate* determining factor in history is the social activity of humans in the production and exchange of the means of life is not to say that it is the *only* factor.

Socialist Feminists, like many before them, totally distort historical materialism and turn it into economic determinism, a distortion fought by Marx and Engels themselves:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their form in particular. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents... the economic movement is finally bound to assert itself.²⁶

The critics of Marxism clearly do not understand the meaning of either the terms "materialism" or "dialectics." Marxism is then faulted for an approach that is not, never has been, and cannot possibly be part of

its framework.

Mitchell,²⁷ for example, rejects what she says is Engels' idea that "Woman's condition can be deduced derivatively from the economy" by arguing that women's condition is a "specific structure which is a unity of different elements." The incorrect implication, of course, is that Engels has ignored the complexities of women's condition by focusing on economic factors as primary.

Let us look for a moment at Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. According to Socialist Feminists, Engels' work was too narrow, too focused on the economy, and too simplistic. And yet the title of Engels' work alone gives us a clue that his primary concern was with the origin of the family, an element of the superstructure, and that he was examining the interrelationships of sexuality, economy and polity. The body of Engels' work, in fact, bears out this assumption. Although Engels does focus on the connection between family form and the stage of development of productive relations, the explanation of his argument involves the discussion of such classic Radical Feminist topics as the nature of domestic labor, prostitution, divorce, sexual freedom, and the nature of "love." Engels, therefore, can, and does, assess the interrelationship of elements, while simultaneously asserting the primacy of one causal variable – how people produce and exchange their means of subsistence.



Criticism #2: Marxism does not deal adequately with the subjective experiences of women.

This common theme, which appears throughout Socialist Feminist writings, is really the obverse of the above argument. These authors conclude that since Marxism as a theory puts emphasis on the economic elements of the social system, it cannot deal with the hearts and minds of women experiencing sexual oppression. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Socialist

Feminists see the feelings and ideas of and about women as central both to the maintenance of sexual inequality and to the eventual liberation of women.

However, this critique of Marxism is once again based on an incorrect assessment of the theory, and again indicates the lack of understanding of the concept of dialectics. Marxists are aware of the importance of thoughts and feelings and the ways in which they can lead to (or prevent) the alteration of social reality; at the same time Marxists argue that these feelings and ideas do not drop out of the sky, but rather are the reflection of real historical and economic conditions.

For Marxists there is a dialectical relationship between ideas on the one hand and actions on the other. While "consciousness-raising" is a valid process to a point, Marxists argue that it is necessary, but *not sufficient* for women's liberation. Put differently, while Marxists would agree with Socialist Feminists that awareness of their condition will begin to lead women to change it, they would also argue that the process of changing their lives leads to a changing consciousness. One woman who participated in the strike at Fleck in Centralia, Ontario in 1978 describes the changes that occurred during that strike:

I can remember girls in that plant that used to cry and they wouldn't say boo to a goose. Since the strike has started they have more confidence, they don't mind stating their opinion, they found out that there is somebody that will listen to them. Not one woman on that picket line will ever be the same and she will never go back in a plant like that, that one or one like it and let management or a man, ever make sexual overtures to her or tell her 'You do this or you do that,' or run a machine that's not running properly, and say to her, 'Either you go on it or you walk.' Not one of them will ever be like that again. It's changed them that much... I think if you asked most of the women on the picket line, they wouldn't know what women's liberation is. I know I wouldn't. But if you asked us if we believe that women should have equal pay for equal jobs with men, we believe in that... I think it's (a change for) some of the shy ones in the plant. If a man ever came up and started being a chauvinist, say five months ago, they might break down and cry; now they would take him on with words and beat him at his own game. They are that much more sure of themselves. That way, yes I guess they are women libbers. You better believe it.²⁸

It is clear that in the example above, a real struggle for the women at Fleck did more to raise their consciousness than years of "education" or "group sessions."

A similar process occurs to women in developing countries as they become part of anti-imperialist struggles. Margaret Randall described the situation for

women in Nicaragua:

The extensive involvement of women in the revolutionary process was in part the result of their integration into the national economy. They have been continually pushed beyond the narrow domestic scene... History forced them to assume positions and make decisions which, along with their economic activity, increased their social and political involvement... But it wasn't only economics that pushed so many women in Nicaragua to join the movement. Widespread political repression was also a factor... Women of all classes responded to this repression by becoming revolutionaries.²⁹

Of course, not only did this involvement alter women's perceptions, but it had an effect on their relationships with men as well:

Personal relationships have changed. In general I think they've improved. During a revolutionary process ideas change. This is the case with women. Women participated in our Revolution, not in the kitchens but as combatants. In the political leadership. This gives us a very different experience. Of course they played other roles during the war and acquired tremendous moral authority, so that any man – even in intimate relationships – had to respect them. A man would be hard put to lift a hand to hit or mistreat a woman combatant.³⁰

For Marxists the ability to eliminate our oppressive situation comes about not only as a result of knowing the cause of our problem. The capacity for change also requires that we have a viable alternative and a means of achieving it.

And for Marxists this developing political consciousness, as seen above, comes about in the process of acting to change our world. It is in these struggles that women become aware of the possibilities for change, the limits of change within the present system, and of their individual and collective capacity to effect change.

Criticism #3: Marxism is "sex-blind" – it does not deal adequately with the unique oppression of women.

Another commonly heard criticism of Classical Marxism in the women's movement is its inadequate consideration of the unique condition of women. While it is true that the issue of sexism and sexual inequality was not central to the works of Marx, Engels or Lenin, they all gave it consideration. Lenin, for example, wrote a classic statement about housework (a central issue in all Socialist Feminist literature):

...woman continues to be a *domestic slave*, because *petty housework* crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and to the nursery, and wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing

drudgery. The real *emancipation of women*, real communism, will begin only when a mass struggle (led by the proletariat which is in power) is started against this petty domestic economy, or rather when it is *transformed on a mass scale* into large-scale socialist economy.³¹ (emphasis in original)

Communists were among the first to support equality for women, and of course, the Soviet Union was the first country to guarantee full nights for women in its constitution. However, even if the early Marxists had given *no* consideration to women's condition, this would not be a criterion for judging the legitimacy of their analysis. The theory of gravity is not negated merely because Newton did not consider its application to jet planes or rubber ducks. That it *can* be applied to them is further evidence of its validity. Likewise, that Marxism can so adequately explain the present condition of women again demonstrates the high degree of comprehensiveness which this theory represents. Like all sciences, Marxist laws are stated in their most general form. Present-day Marxists must then apply them to current concrete social situations. In this way, Marxism, as any science, grows and develops.

Criticism #4: Marxism cannot be correct since there is still sexism in socialist countries.

No Marxist would argue with the fact that there is evidence of certain aspects of sexism in all socialist countries. However, Marxists do not assume that the elimination of private ownership of the means of production *automatically or mechanically* eliminates sexual inequality. As mentioned earlier, Marxists argue that the elimination of exploitative class relations creates the *precondition* for the elimination of sexism. In her classic "Political Economy of Women's Liberation" Benston comments:

The idea of the inferior status of women is deeply rooted in society and will take a great deal of effort to eradicate. But once the structures which produce and support that idea are changed, then, and only then, can we hope to make progress.³²

Contradictions, then, continue to exist within socialist systems, although the elimination of class conflict ends the antagonistic quality of these contradictions. In other words the class which now has state power, the working class, does not benefit in any material way from the continued maintenance of sexism. Certainly the speed with which a socialist society progresses toward full sexual equality will depend on a number of variables, the most important of which is the level of economic development of the society at the time of revolution. The validity of Marxism in relation to so-

cialist societies must be judged not by asking whether sexism exists in socialist systems, but rather whether it is greater or less than capitalist systems at the same approximate level of economic development, and whether it is increasing or decreasing over time. The overwhelming body of evidence indicates that the answer is the latter in both instances.

Criticisms #5 and #6: Marxism is a theory formulated by men; many Marxists are sexist.

The above are personalistic attacks on the proponents, not an examination of the theory itself. In other words, they cannot be used to judge the scientific validity or invalidity of the theory.

Conclusions of Socialist Feminist theory

The bottom line for almost all Socialist Feminist writers is the use of Marxist categories to "prove" the centrality of "women" as the most revolutionary force in the transformation of capitalist societies. The most common approach is the attempt to demonstrate the primacy of women's domestic labor to the maintenance of capitalism. Luxton, for example, states:

As the necessary complement of the wage labor/capital relationship, domestic labor is a *central* labor process of industrial capitalism.³³ [emphasis added]

Other writers focus on the role of women as a secondary labor force in capitalist economies:

By and large...socialists do not consider fighting women's oppression...as a central aspect of the struggle against capitalism itself. A theory of women's oppression under capitalism which showed capitalism as essentially patriarchal could change the relation between feminist political practice and the struggle to transform capitalist institutions and relations. If it is the case that the marginalization of women and our functioning as a secondary labor force are central to capitalism as it developed historically and as it exists today, then the struggle against the oppression of women and our marginalization in this society is itself anti-capitalist.³⁴ [emphasis in original]

Still other writers, such as Eisenstein, attempt to use Marx's concept of alienation to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of women:

One's class position defines consciousness for Marx, but, if we utilize the revolutionary ontological method, it need not be limited to this. If we wish to say that a woman is defined in terms of her sex as well, patriarchal relations define her consciousness and have implications for her revolutionary potential as a result. By locating revolutionary potential as it reflects conflicts

between people's real condition (existence) and possibilities (essence), we can understand how patriarchal relations inhibit the development of human essence. In this sense, the conception of species life points to the revolutionary potential of men and women.³⁵

One author, in a unique fashion, links the revolutionary potential of women to personality differences:

...women cannot expect men to liberate anyone from class oppression...as long as stereotypically masculine and feminine personalities are produced and reproduced as they evidently are under the present division of labor. Thus women must take the lead not only in the struggle against patriarchy, but also in the struggle against the underlying interests men have in controlling both patriarchy and capital and in perpetuating dominating relations through various kinds of oppressive relations with others... Women are now the revolutionary group in history.³⁶

This underlying theme runs through almost all Socialist Feminist literature, although some writers are more direct than others. However, the point is reiterated again and again that women's role is central to capitalism, and hence women as a category must be central, or perhaps even pre-eminent, as a force in ending it. It is not that these authors are necessarily unsympathetic to the working class. However, none accepts the Marxist position that the working class is ultimately the most revolutionary force in capitalist societies. The working class, in this analysis, can fight against capitalism but not patriarchy, exploitation but not oppression, conditions in the workplace but not in the family. The women's movement, then, can forge alliances with working class organizations, but can never be secondary to them.

While Classical Marxists would also argue for a strong autonomous women's movement, they also understand the dialectical relationship between the strength of the women's movement and the strength of the working class. The women's movement needs to have autonomy in its structure, but it will never draw in the mass of women if its aims and goals are not directly linked to the real needs of working women. For Marxists, the struggle for sexual equality is never separate from the class struggle.

Implications of Socialist Feminist theory

Thus although it is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, Socialist Feminism as a theory rejects the basic underlying premises of Classical Marxism. The consequences of accepting Socialist Feminism, therefore, are identical to the consequences of accepting the

many preceding "revisions" of Marxism: it weakens the capacity of workers to unite in a truly revolutionary movement, or even at times for progressive reforms; it diverts people's attention from essential issues to secondary ones; it supports and feeds the anti-communism already so prevalent in Canadian society. (Red-baiting is regrettably common in the Canadian women's movement.)³⁷

Socialist Feminism must be assessed in light of the fact that most of its theoreticians come from the middle strata of society. Historically this sector has always felt the contradictory pulls of the two opposing dominant classes, particularly in times of rapid social change. For such women these contradictions are especially heightened: on the one hand, their position in the class structure has given them certain benefits and privileges, as well as a particular world view; on the other hand, their sex has denied them full access to those benefits and has given them the experience of oppression. Socialist Feminism is a theoretical framework which allows some of these women to handle these two opposing pressures. They can call for an end to all sexism, while focusing almost totally on the realm where women of *their* strata experience their oppression – the family, sexuality, and personal relations. They can call for the end of capitalism while rejecting the leading role of the working class. They can show support for some reforms within the system while opposing working class parties with revolutionary goals and a history of success in fighting capitalism and imperialism. They can argue for a new society free from sexism (called "socialism"), while at the same time rejecting extant socialist systems and offering no real proposals of their own.

It should be made clear at this juncture that the above critique of Socialist Feminism *as a theory* is in no way meant as a criticism of individual Socialist Feminists. The sincerity and conscious motivation of the above writers or their adherents is not being called into question. However, Marxists are obliged to assess the overall objective consequences, not the subjective intent of social theory. Unfortunately the consequences of Socialist Feminism are too often far removed from the expressed or intended aims of its theoreticians.

Conclusions

At the outset of this paper we argued for the importance of assessing the validity of the existing frameworks which analyze sexual inequality. For some, this



may at times become a rather academic pursuit. For others, such as the women presently struggling to liberate themselves from a brutal fascist, racist and sexist apartheid regime in South Africa, the question is far from academic. It is clear that for these women, the decisions they make about how best to fight their struggle, based on both their assessments of the primary cause of their condition and the most effective means of eliminating it, are literally a matter of life and death. In this context, the correct analytical framework stands out with stark clarity:

In South Africa Black women, these most vulnerable of all people within the apartheid state, have been forced to embark on a struggle that takes them beyond their own specific oppression. The struggle of South African women for recognition as equal citizens with equal opportunities is *primarily the struggle against apartheid, for national liberation*. Nor is it a question of putting one first, then taking up the other. The victory of this struggle against apartheid is the absolute condition for any change in the social status of women as a whole; their participation is an expression not only of their desire to rid all South Africa of the curse of apartheid, but also of their deep concern for their own status as women.³⁸ [emphasis added]

In this context, the Socialist Feminist concepts of men "colluding" with the ruling class, of the universal bond of "sisterhood" (white and Black women sharing a common oppression), of the centrality of the family as the oppressor of women in capitalist societies, of the primacy of "consciousness-raising" as a method for change – in this context all these arguments seem far removed from reality. The struggle to liberate South Africa can be won only through the unity of all forces opposed to this repressive system, and the success of this struggle is obviously the precondition for the liberation of South African women.

The example of South Africa demonstrates the limited applicability of Socialist Feminist theory, and

as was mentioned early in the paper, the value of any theoretical framework lies in the degree of its inclusiveness and generality. In particular, the notion of the centrality of women's domestic role and the family for the maintenance of capitalism which is so much a part of Socialist Feminism is not applicable to the South African situation. Capitalists require labor power, but they do not care about the process by which that labor power is reproduced and maintained. In South Africa the domestic life of the Blacks has been consciously *destroyed* by the state, and replaced with single sex hostels for the maintenance of the labor power required by white employers. In this situation, the family is not the central force for the oppression of women, but in fact, is a potential source of unity and strength.³⁹

* * *

This paper has attempted to show that there is no "middle road" between Radical Feminism and Classical Marxism. These two theoretical frameworks cannot be integrated into anything that would have scientific validity or offer useful solutions to the condition of sexual inequality. This means that Socialist Feminists must themselves eventually choose to come down on one side or the other. It is clear that many Socialist Feminist writers endorse the Radical Feminist position; for the rest who feel uncomfortable with that position, they might be surprised to discover that they are not as far from Classical Marxism as they might think.

As mentioned throughout this paper, much of the Socialist Feminist critique of Classical Marxism is based on an incorrect interpretation of the theory. Marxists do not believe that Classical Marxism is "the bee's knees" (to quote Rowbotham)⁴⁰ on every subject; they simply argue that Marxism provides the best tools for analyzing today's social reality. There is no question that the women's movement has made many real gains for women. It seems, however, that it would be better served if those addressing the question of sexual inequality spent less time criticizing Marxism, and more time utilizing and developing these already proven tools of social science. ■

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FALSE IMPRESSIONS: FORM AND CONTENT

Jeanne McGuire

I am not what anyone would call technologically acculturated. I say that to explain why I can be found on too many occasions, scrolling through the headlines that appear on my computer when I open my browser or when I close my email account. I could try to justify it by saying it provides a glimpse of the inanities and insanities that dominate North American politics, culture and media. Indeed, it does, and more than a glimpse, thousands upon millions of videos and reports create a veritable panorama of capitalist crud. But mostly it is because I am tired, should go to bed, but am in a kind of numb, passive state looking at whatever appears before me.

All of this to introduce this edition's editorial. On one of my midnight scrolls down the innumerable headlines, one caught my attention. It was something to do with what dictators ate, according to the headline, as told by their chefs. But it was not the headline that caught my attention, it was the picture that accompanied the words. It was a picture of Fidel Castro. I'm sure had I clicked on the headline I would have read about the eating habits and food preferences of Hitler, Stalin, maybe Kim Jong Un and Idi Amin, as well as Fidel Castro. I would not have read about the odd eating preferences of Franco, Salazar, Papa Doc, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, or Pinochet. I did not click on the headline, so I cannot confirm any of the above, but

I am confident in my estimation.

The headline/picture evoked a memory of a day in class when I was studying for my Bachelor of Education. It was a political science course, and on that occasion, we had a guest speaker from the Goethe Institute who had grown up in Germany. Not entirely sure, but I recollect that she had been born before the war so was a child during the Nazi regime. The focus of her talk was the question of Nazi indoctrination, specifically of the young. I don't remember everything she had to say, but I do remember being impressed with her presentation. One thing that did stick in my mind was her answer to a question by one of the students suggesting the Young Pioneers in the German Democratic Republic were the same as the Hitler Youth. Her response was to completely reject the idea that a children's organization dedicated to peace and friendship between the peoples of the world could in any way be compared to one that inculcated ideas of racial superiority and the glorification of violence and war.

What the first example – the conflation of a range of leaders from different types of social systems into a single category of dictator – expresses, and what the second example – the response to a question about the similarities between the Young Pioneers and the Hitler Youth – rejects, is the failure to distinguish between form and content, between appearance and reality.

If we fail to distinguish between form and content, appearance and reality, it is impossible to discern the real character of what happens or exists in the world. For example, without understanding that distinction, it is not possible to understand that membership in a union creates more real democracy for workers than citizenship in a capitalist country. For although each comes with the right to elect the leadership, a similarity of form, the content of each is quite different.

Membership in a union creates an increase in control over the variables in the workplace that affect the income, conditions of labour including the right to refuse unsafe work. Matters which directly affect the living conditions of workers and their families, and in the case of the right to refuse unsafe work, the matter of life and death. A union places more constraints upon the exercise of power by employers or managers, with respect to promotion, discipline, layoff or termination than is the case in workplaces not covered by a union collective agreement, in other words workplaces covered only by the rules established by the governments elected by those same workers. Yes, there are other issues that affect a workers life that are only within the purview of the governments elected by citizens: expenditures on social services versus money given to corporations or spent on the military; the taxation system that may be fair or skewed to favour the powerful; regulations that protect or fail to protect the environment, the health and safety of workers, the rights of the unemployed, the injured, and the marginalized are all matters controlled by government. But for those lucky enough to be in a unionized workplace, the effect of one's union membership is immediate and daily.

The elections themselves are also dissimilar in content. Within capitalism, the elections for government are shaped, if not entirely decided, by wealth and power, where the money spent during the election reflects the wealth of those who support the political position of the party. This influence of wealth and power is not just during the election itself but for all the days and weeks between elections when the newspapers, the television, the radio and the internet tell us what is reasonable and what is unreasonable, who is acceptable and who is not, what can be done and what can not, and most importantly perhaps, what is to be remembered and what will be buried and forgotten. In other words, during an election for government, there are contesting classes, those that own the workplaces, the factories, the shops, the banks, the newspapers, the television companies,

the internet providers, and those that do not. Those that own those elements of power and persuasion win and do so in such a way that we think we are, in fact, the ones deciding our preferred government. Again and again, **we** vote, and **they** get the government they want. And when the elected government delivers policies that favour the class that owns, we are told we can always vote, in another four or five years, for another party. Another party that is funded and favoured by those who own. As the Rolling Stones so succinctly noted in one of their songs, "we don't know who will win but we know who's going to lose."



In contrast, within a union, the election is between two people who are both from the same class, most often from within the same industry or workplace. In addition, workers within a union do not just vote for the leadership and then do nothing until the next election. There likely will be a vote on the demands that should be advanced during negotiations. For sure there will be a vote on whether to accept the proposed new collective agreement. If they attend their union meetings, they will be asked to vote on any number of resolutions with respect to what should be the union's position on social questions of concern to unionists. And not just vote, but to discuss and debate with their fellow workers.

While there is competing views on how best to achieve what all workers want, better wages and working conditions, more holidays and benefits – some say

struggle, some say co-operation with management – the class interests are the same. Without doubt, there have been and will be leaders who betray their members, who are bought off, line their own pockets and deceive their members by not fighting for their interests, for cozying up to management. Nonetheless, within capitalism, unions have been and are the single most crucial element in the advancement of workers rights and standards of living – within the workplace **and** in society as a whole. So many of the features of our system that we value – public pensions, statutory holidays, holiday pay, overtime pay, socialized medicine, maternity leave, health and safety regulations, to name but a few – have been conceded by successive governments once they have been won by one or more unions for their members.

So, a union victory becomes a victory for all workers, but also a concession that assures other workers they need not join a union in order to achieve them. And sometimes receiving the results of the union's efforts isn't a matter of years. Everyone in Hamilton, Ontario knew that when the workers at Stelco went out, they were striking for the non-unionized workers at Dofasco as well as themselves – including the Dofasco workers who traditionally made generous donations to the Stelco strike fund. They knew that the wage and benefit features of the Stelco agreement would become the gains of the Dofasco worker – while allowing Dofasco to avoid the inconvenience of a grievance procedure, layoff and recall restrictions, or any other restraint on “management rights”.

Even more egregious than the above example, is the political sleight of hand that renders communism equivalent to fascism.

Historically, large segments of the working class understood that socialism and its later stage, communism and the communist parties that fought for it, represented their collective interests. They understood that the ruling parties of the day represented the interests of the capitalist class and the landowners. Yes, some thought that what was good for “General Motors” (or whatever large corporation they worked for or whose presence dominated their community) was what was good for them. And yes, some thought that social democracy could get them to socialism by inching their way forward with minute changes and co-operation with capital. Or they believed that social democracy's capitulation on the major questions of power was worth it for the small, never-system challenging changes that



social democracy could win. But for the decades after the Paris Commune until the end of World War II, the working class was enthralled with the idea of a new society in which their needs, their interests would dominate and the policies of the government and the laws of the land would reflect what was best for them, not the class that lived off their labour.

Prior to the war, unions and unionism were met with intransigent opposition and often with physical force, using police, militia, and paid thugs to intimidate and deny the will of workers to organize in their own interests. After the war, with the boom years from 1945 until about the end of the 1960's, growing prosperity certainly mitigated the militancy of the 1930's and 40's. However, the success of the war propaganda and the increasing sophistication of the ever more accessible media forms added a new and powerful mechanism for undermining the class consciousness of workers. An enormous amount of effort and money was spent to transform the post-war working class into allies of capitalism at home and imperialism abroad. These efforts included contesting the role of communists in unions and smashing or sidelining unions with a significant presence of communists in the leadership. When persuasion didn't work, force could be, and was, used, but an important weapon was the massively funded and intensively and extensively asserted accusation that communism was anti-democratic, totalitarian, identical or disparagingly similar to fascism.¹

Everyone knew how evil and horrifying fascism was, the war propaganda had been successful in describing it and the new media, television as well as movies, brought us daily descriptions and depictions of what it had wrought. This evil had been our enemy in the war and, according to the same media, the West had defeated it. The role of Soviet Union and communists

in the countries in the conflict was being completely erased. Now, workers were told, the enemy was back, but this time it was the communists, who they said shared the same totalitarian characteristics as fascism and would rob workers of their freedom.

Like the student who thought the Young Pioneers and the Hitler Youth were cut from the same cloth, workers and their potential allies were told that fascism and communism were cut from the same cloth, totalitarian, dictatorial, repressive, destructive of freedom and human rights. The success of these efforts is easily perceived and certainly apparent to any communist who has gone into the streets to talk to people about any of the issues of the day.

What were the features that could be characterised in such a way that allowed that presentation to take hold?

- An election system that did not replicate the system used in capitalist societies where different parties run for elected office with campaigns attacking each other to determine which one will administer the country.
- The fact that in many socialist countries there is only one party, a workers' party, whether it is called communist or not.
- The lack of time limits on the term of office of the head of the state.
- Laws and regulations that make collective rights more significant than individual rights.
- Policies that restrict and control the rights of private property.
- A state of siege approach which restricted certain political freedoms, like travel, but which was deemed necessary, as history has so powerfully proven, to survive the relentless onslaught of capitalism determined to destroy its only sustainable, humane, progressive alternative. The onslaught did not end with the destruction of socialism in Europe. It continues – witness Cuba's plight at the hands of U.S. imperialism for over 60 years.

That is the appearance. While some of the descriptors have some basis in reality, the content is quite different.

Elections do take place in socialist societies, elections where people select their representatives at a variety of levels of decision making. The extent and import of such electoral activity often reflect nothing more than the level of social development as well as the lev-

el of external threat. Voting in capitalism also changed over time, from only men of property, expanding to include working-class white men, then white women, and finally to all men and women. A common response to the advent of expanded suffrage was the creation of parliamentary bodies which did not represent the people but were designed to protect class privilege – the electoral college as well as the Senate in the United States, the appointed Senate in Canada and appointed House of Lords (the name says it all) in The United Kingdom. These mechanisms were a way for the ruling class to hedge its bets against the possibility of workers voting in a government which might make substantive changes. The expansion of the right to vote within capitalist societies reflected the same factors – the level of social development, the strength of the capitalist class and their confidence that they could survive any attempt by the old ruling class to reclaim their privilege. Such confidence allows a continuation of voting rights until the rising contesting class, the working class, threatens to win via the ballot. At which point the right to vote is often removed, the return to a state of siege, which within capitalism often takes the form of fascism. It is capitalism that withdrew the right to vote when threatened with defeat, not socialism.

More importantly, in socialism, no one is elected because they can amass millions of dollars to wage their campaign. Or because they or their friends and class allies individually own the television or newspapers, or the internet providers. All contestants are essentially equal in their access to you and your vote.

While some socialist countries have had more than one party represented within their parliamentary forum, many were or are one party states. One-party states do not obviate the democratic process; they merely shift the arena within which the democratic process takes place. One party presumes that everyone represents the same goal and that differences are about how to best achieve it, in the same way as was described above with respect to the election within unions. Moreover, even within one party states, citizens who do not belong to the party can and do run for office and are elected.

The lack of limits to the term of office is not a feature of socialism alone, although such lack of limits is in no way significant. Only the Americans, with their two-term limit, are of the opinion that the lack of experience is a guarantee of an absence of corruption or abuse of power, Canadians for example have experienced many parties and individuals who have led their government

for multiple terms. The Social Credit governed Alberta for 36 years of which Ernest Manning was premier for 28 years. After which Albertans elected the Progressive Conservatives for the next 44 years. The Liberals formed the federal government under WLM King from 1921 to 1930 and then again from 1935 to 1948. The issue is not how long you serve, but who you serve and how well you serve. Most communists as well as many others including many Americans, would prefer 50 years of Fidel to 4 years of Trump.

Collective rights are the prerequisites of individual rights, otherwise you live in a society where “everyone for themselves, as the elephant said as it danced among the guinea hens”. A society where, as Anatole France so eloquently said, “the law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal their bread”. A social system that gets rid of poverty, ends homelessness, provides jobs, free education and healthcare, delivers the substance of equality, not just its appearance; substantive equality, not formal equality.

The rights of private property are indeed restricted within most socialist societies. However, it is important to realize that the character of the private property that is thus restricted is significant. Individual private ownership is allowed; your personal property is your property. Productive property, property that is privately owned and produces a profit via the hired labour of others, is another matter. It may not exist at all, or it may be restricted based on factors like the number of employees, management rights, investment opportunities, available supports, and where it can do business or trade. Since there are 1.22 million employer businesses in Canada, but only 100,000 to 120,000 of these employ more than twenty-five people, it would seem evident that ensuring the rights of individuals over the rights of private owners of productive property is an exercise in real democracy for the vast majority of the citizenry.

The state of siege that most socialist countries, and even many who merely aspire to a break from imperialist pillage, while not favourably comparable to some of the features of capitalism (well, capitalism if you don't

include capitalist countries like Haiti) are designed to withstand the pressures and incursions of imperialism. Were they necessary? Was Gadafi wrong or Maduro when they all claimed the enemy was intent on their destruction? Is Cuba?

What all the above shows is that the sleight of hand focuses your attention on appearances while the other hand throws a veil over the substance of the two systems, obscuring and deliberately distorting them. It is a mechanism of control, a form of propaganda designed to keep workers from recognizing the reality of both the system they live in and the one they might otherwise want to create.

Communism and fascism are not cut from the same cloth. They are the inverse of each other. Everything one stands for the other abhors and condemns. Fascism is capitalism without any democratic rights. Communism is the end of capitalism and the domination of the capitalist class over every aspect of the society. It is an economy where workers rights and interests dominate, where the working class is the ruling class. The cloth is not the same, the cut is not the same, even the pattern (vision of the future) and the scissors (means of achieving its goals) are different. Certainly, the garment produced is different, completely different. Exposing the jiggery-pokery used to make communism appear like fascism is one step in exposing the real character of capitalism – its exploitation, oppression, war and all its attendant injustices. It will also help expose the real character of socialism and the possibility of an economic system designed to meet human needs not the corporate bottom line. ■

1. For detail with respect to these efforts to redirect the thinking about socialism and communism the following titles are illustrative: *Blue Collar Empire*, Jeff Schurke; *Who Paid the Piper, the CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, Francis Stoner Saunders; *Competing Visions: the CIA, the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Non-communist European Left, 1950 – 1967*, thesis by Scott Kamen, Western Michigan University



COMMUNIST APPROACH TO STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Dave McKee

Part one: The Communist Party's strategic line

One of the things which distinguishes the Communist Party from other groups on the left – from the NDP to anarchists to the different Marxist political organizations – is its focus on and treatment of the question of strategy and tactics.

Strategy refers to the overall plan for achieving our goal, and tactics are the concrete application of that strategy in specific conditions, generally towards more specific objectives which relate to our overall goal.

We all know Marx's famous comment from the Thesis on Feuerbach, which is also inscribed on his grave – "Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it!"

The question of strategy and tactics is what brings us to that point – it is our live conduit into the concrete class struggle.

A correct approach to strategy and tactics means that, whether the working-class movement is weak or strong, whether it is under attack or on the attack, whether it is fighting in a defensive position or an offensive one, communists can identify concrete pathways to help build the working-class struggle and move it forward.

Our strategic line takes us into the fights for reforms but takes us away from the limits and illusions of reformism, which restricts the class struggle to fighting

for reforms. Communist strategy promotes the necessity of revolution but rejects the self-imposed isolation of "pure" revolutionaries who denounce this and that as being insufficient or compromised, while standing alone in splendid isolation from the masses.

Communist strategy gets our hands dirty in the fertile ground of the class struggle and plants the seeds of change. Application of tactics in the concrete struggle is a test – are our strategy and analysis correct? It provides us with real experience and feedback, which we use for evaluation, correction, etc. And the communist approach is dynamic – changing conditions require changing tactics, and maybe even changing strategies – tactics that do not develop with the concrete conditions are doomed to be left behind by them. This would be a fatal weakness in the movement for socialism, to not be armed with and guided by revolutionary strategy and tactics, and that is why we spend so much of our time and energy on developing them, on evaluating and updating them as necessary.

Strategy

Tactics emerge from strategy and strategy emerges from a goal.

The goal of the Communist Party is socialism, but there have been different movements for socialism throughout the past two centuries, each with different strategies. Some of the approaches of those different movements still have an impact today. In broad terms, we could generally divide these movements into three

groups: utopian, reformist and scientific.

Utopian socialism is usually used in reference to early 19th century movements, perhaps the most famous being that of Robert Owen. Utopian socialism is often thought of as having been swept aside by later movements, but its basic features do still echo today. It relies on moral and ethical arguments to convince people – all people, including the owning class – to share and cooperate for the common good. We see elements of utopian socialism in the British Labour Party under Tony Blair, who publicly argued for “ethical socialism,” and it is also often seen in religious or pacifist movements for socialism which eschew class struggle in favour of a moral appeal to all people. It also informs parts of the environmental movement and the mutual aid movement.

At heart, this is an idealistic vision that almost always turns its eyes away from the actuality of class society, and certainly divorces itself from the reality and necessity of class struggle. As such, while it may advocate a compelling vision of an ideal society, it is not grounded in reality and cannot project a strategy for actually achieving socialism.

Reformism refers to the view that fighting for reforms is sufficient – that reforms are, essentially, an end in themselves. While fighting for reforms is a critical component of the struggle for socialism, reformists restrict the aims and activities of the working class to the winning of reforms. Rather than struggle for the overthrow of capitalism – for a rupture with the capitalist system – reformism proposes that workers need only win and accumulate a sufficient quantity of reforms to that system, in order to morph it into a better one.

Lenin described reformism as a “bourgeois deception of the workers, who, despite individual improvements, will always remain wage-slaves, as long as there is the domination of capital.”

Reformism is the prevailing ideological current in the working-class movement in Canada, particularly the labour movement. Its main political expression is social democracy, mainly represented (especially in English-speaking Canada) by the NDP. Precisely because it is so dominant, we need to understand reformism from a strategic and tactical point of view, and also recognize what it does to the working-class movement.

In many ways, reformism is most limited by its view of the capitalist state, which it sees as an impartial authority, standing above classes. Based on this distor-

tion, reformism tends to restrict people’s movements to narrow parliamentary aims and partial reforms. In the working class, it leads to class collaboration and the illusion of a possible class partnership between workers and capitalists.

The weakness of reformism is evidenced by the fact that much of the social democratic movement in Canada and globally has completely abandoned the goal of socialism. Of course, there are elements that remain – often under the name “democratic socialism” – and many of those people move into political action around key struggles, and we work with them to advance those struggles. But objectively, by defining the aim of socialism as a “just society” or “welfare state,” and by positioning socialism as the outcome of endless improvements or stages of capitalism, reformism politically disarms the working class and adapts the labour movement to the preservation of capitalism, not its overthrow and replacement.

Scientific socialism approaches questions of societal change from a historical viewpoint, understanding that social and political developments are largely determined by economic conditions. Change does not come about through moral appeals or through enlightened legislators, but through struggle – it is the masses who make change.

Furthermore, scientific socialists recognize the class nature and role of the state – that it is not a neutral body existing above classes, and that while governments can be elected and changed the capitalist state itself cannot be reformed into something else. It must be replaced by a workers’ state – that is what we mean by working-class power (the dictatorship of the proletariat) which is necessary to build socialism.

Rooted in historical and dialectical materialism, Marxism-Leninism is scientific socialism, and this is



the outlook of the Communist Party. Sometimes we refer to it as the theory and practice of socialism. It isn't a dogma, laid down for all time and recited by rote like a catechism. Rather, it is a living, developing theory, a tool of analysis and guide to action which incorporates the concentrated experience of all the struggles of the working class, both in Canada and around the world.

We use this to analyze the concrete conditions of the class struggle – including the nature of capitalism and its sharpening social contradictions, the balance of class forces, the composition and organization of the working class, the composition and organization of progressive and democratic movements, the relative strength of the revolutionary movement, etc. And from that analysis, we get a clearer picture of the path forward (which is not always obvious!) and can develop a strategic line for building the class struggle.

The strategy document of the Communist Party is its program, *Canada's Future is Socialism*. The program includes a comprehensive Marxist-Leninist analysis of the concrete conditions of class struggle in Canada, and this underpins the strategic line whose core is found in Chapter 5, "The Working Class and People's Struggle" and Chapter 6, "For a People's Government."

The most concise statement of the Party's strategy is at the end of Chapter 5:

"In all of its mass political work, the Communist Party strives to help build a democratic, anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist alliance. Such a new alliance will include the Communist Party and other parties and political organizations, democratic people's organizations in Quebec and English-speaking Canada, Indigenous peoples, the trade unions, farm organizations, youth and student organizations, associations of intellectuals and professionals, women's and 2S/LGBTiQ organizations, senior citizens organizations and cooperatives.

"The Communist Party works to unite all these people's forces as the basis for a democratic, anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist people's government, led by the working class, in which the Communist Party aspires to play a key role."

This alliance would work to advance working people's interests through all available avenues of struggle, based on massive and united extra-parliamentary action. It would seek to build a parliamentary reflection, which could win electoral advances and carry out a sweeping progressive program to democratize society and transform economic relations in the interests of the working class and people as a whole.

In the effort to defend and extend these gains against the counterattacks from capital, during which the working class and its political forces become more experienced and confident, revolutionary conditions will develop and the socialist option advanced by the Communist Party will win wide support.

This is, in a very brief nutshell, the path which communists see for winning working-class power and building socialism in Canada.

Mass action is what makes change, so our strategy is to unite the masses in action. And it isn't just any type of mass unity – it has shape and content, a basis, which is democratic, anti-monopoly and anti-imperialist. It is rooted in the working class not only because the working class is the majority of the population, but because our strategy emerges from an analysis of class society in which working-class interests are, objectively, directly opposite to those of capital. The experience of working together in capitalist society disciplines and trains workers for potential collective action. Because of this, workers can act effectively in support of their class interests, against the interests and policies of the capitalist class. And not only can they do this – they must do it. This makes them the natural leaders of all the progressive forces, and it establishes the primary importance of the labour movement, which is the most organized section of the working class.

There are at least five strategic elements that contribute to building such a democratic, anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist alliance.

1. Unity of the working class. The leading role of the working class is the indispensable factor for effective united action of the people against monopoly capital, and the unity of the working class is essential to its ability to carry out that leading role.

2. Strong and united trade union movement. Unions are the basic organizations of class struggle. As the most organized section of the working class, a strong and united union movement is vital to the defence and advance of the class as a whole. Union gains serve the interests of all working people, organized and unorganized, by helping to raise living standards and social conditions for working people in general.

To fill this role, the union movement must be united on a particular basis, that of class struggle policies and militant actions. Class struggle unionism and coalition building are necessary to oppose reformism and collaboration. Union sovereignty and independence are key elements of this.

3. Unity based on equality. The kind of unity necessary for building the mass struggles of the working class and the people must be based on equality. This means that the working-class movement, and the trade union movement in the first place, has to recognize, confront and overcome inequalities that are perpetuated by capitalist society. These include inequalities based on gender, racialization, national identity, age, disability and others.

4. National equality and sovereignty. Among the inequalities mentioned above, those reflecting the national question bear separate mention because they have a reflection in the structure of the state (in the case of Quebec) and because they involve questions of land and territory. Canada is a multinational state – within in are many Indigenous nations, Acadia, Quebec and English-speaking Canada.

Advancing the struggle requires a powerful alliance of the working class and progressive forces in of all those nations. Such an alliance must be built on the basis of a commitment to national equality and sovereignty – this includes opposing the colonial and genocidal policies which lie at the heart of the foundation of the Canadian state and remain in place today, and also recognizing the right of nations to self-determination up to and including secession.

5. Building alliances among people's forces. Monopoly capital is attacking the living standards and interests of a huge range of the population, including the working class and other strata. This means that a broad and expanding cross-section of the people are compelled to fight back against the power of capital and the state, in order to defend their own economic and political interests.

People's movements involve growing numbers of the population in extra-parliamentary political activi-



ty. They are typically organized in a cross-class manner, although they involve many working-class people (sometimes a majority). To build a vehicle for democratic and social advance, we work to unite these forces with the working class – particularly the labour movement – into broad coalitions which lay the foundation for the further development of social-political alliances.

Each of these elements contributes to the central (and immediate) aim, which is to unite all the people's forces into a democratic, anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist alliance that is led by the working class.

This, then, is the Communist Party's strategic line. Rooted in a historical perspective and firmly based a conjunctural analysis of the current concrete conditions, it outlines the path forward to defeat the dictatorship of capital, replace it with working-class power, and begin to build socialism in Canada. ■

Next issue: "Part two: Tactics as the concrete application of strategy"



MIGRATION, BORDERS AND CLASS: A MARXIST RESPONSE

Eoghan O'Neill

Reprinted from the September 2025 issue of Socialist Voice (Communist Party of Ireland)

Migration has become one of the sharpest dividing lines in Irish politics. Across estates, villages, and towns, people feel the crunch of housing shortages, collapsing health services, and precarious work. The far right has seized on these frustrations, directing anger at migrants instead of profiteers. Meanwhile, parts of the left retreat to easy slogans of “no borders.” However well-meaning, such positions ring hollow to working-class communities living with daily pressures. If we ignore this issue, we abandon the ground to reactionary forces. A Marxist response must acknowledge concerns honestly, bust the myths, and unite Irish and migrant workers against the real culprits: landlords, vulture funds, and imperialism.

Migration is not random, nor is it an “invasion.” It is driven by material forces. Wars waged by the US, Britain, and the EU in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Syria have displaced millions. IMF and World Bank programmes have gutted economies in Africa and Latin America. Climate collapse – caused overwhelmingly by wealthy nations – is rendering parts of the Global South unliveable. People do not leave families and homes lightly; flows “north” are the direct consequence of imperialism. To blame the migrant is to let the true culprits – war-makers, financiers, and fossil capitalists – off the hook.

Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers – not the same

The far right thrives on confusion, painting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as one and the same. The distinctions matter.

Refugees and asylum seekers flee war, persecution, or climate collapse. States are obliged under international law to protect them. In Ireland, many are still warehoused in Direct Provision – a system condemned for years as degrading and slated (but repeatedly delayed) for replacement following the 2021 White Paper.

Economic migrants move for work or study. They do not automatically qualify for housing or benefits. Local authorities apply the same income and residency rules to everyone on social-housing lists. As a housing officer in Carlow put it to me: “Migrants go through the same lists, with the same thresholds, as Irish applicants. Nobody skips the queue.” Councils such as Kilkenny publish clear thresholds and local-connection criteria – evidence that directly contradicts the “free house” myth.

Ireland’s housing crisis was not caused by refugees; it was caused by successive governments handing housing policy to developers, vulture funds, and landlords.

Ireland saw high inward migration in the 12 months

to April 2024 – almost 150,000 arrivals – including 30,000 returning Irish citizens and 27,000 other EU citizens. Net migration was 79,000. By April 2025, immigration fell to 125,300, with net migration at 59,700. The language of “invasion” collapses under scrutiny; what’s missing is state investment in housing and services.

If we want to know where our homes went, look to the funds. In 2022, so-called vulture funds bought about 6,000 homes – roughly one in ten sold that year. Thousands of households are now trapped on punitive mortgage rates – around 7,000 paying 8.5–10%. Billions have been extracted from communities by corporate landlords – yet it is migrants who are blamed, while profiteers continue unhindered.

Community concerns and far-right exploitation

We must also acknowledge reality. In some small towns, the sudden arrival of refugee families strains already weak services and changes the feel of local life. When people are not consulted, anger grows. The state then dumps responsibility on residents – without investing in housing, schools, or healthcare. That vacuum is where the far right moves in, turning frustration into racist mobilisation, as seen in East Wall and elsewhere. Even Gardaí have stated there is no significant link between asylum seekers and increased crime – a point that punctures the scare stories used to inflame tensions. The anger is real, but it is misdirected.

Recent attacks on migrants – particularly Indian workers – show how dangerous this path is. Racist violence is not just an attack on migrants; it is an attack on the entire working class. Division weakens us all while landlords and bosses grow stronger.

Integration, not division

If there is an alternative to division, it lies in solidarity. Communities are right to feel anger when decisions about refugee accommodation are imposed from above with no consultation and no explanation. That anger, however, should not be turned against the families arriving, but against a system that refuses transparency. When communities are brought into the conversation – when plans are explained, timelines are clear, and resourcing is guaranteed – fear and resentment can give way to understanding.

But consultation alone is not enough. The state has starved public housing of investment while shovelling resources into the pockets of funds. As long as there

are too few homes, resentment will grow. The answer is not to pit Irish families against migrant families, but to build homes for all – by breaking with profiteers and putting housing back in public hands.

Integration also demands support. Families arriving in Ireland need English classes, school places, health services, and community links. Without these, isolation sets in, making it easier for reactionaries to sow division. A society that invests in integration reaps stronger, more cohesive communities.

Most importantly, integration is about unity in struggle. Irish and migrant workers face the same landlords, the same bosses, the same collapsing services. When unions fight wage theft, when tenants resist rent hikes, when communities demand investment, it matters little whether the hands raised in solidarity are Irish-born or migrant. What matters is that they are raised together.

A class response

Migration is not the cause of Ireland’s crisis. The roots lie in imperialist wars that displace millions abroad, and in profiteering at home that leaves workers scrambling for housing and healthcare. The comprador class in Ireland – landlords, developers, and politicians who bend the knee to EU and US interests – thrives on this chaos.

The far right offers division, scapegoating migrants for problems they did not create. Liberal moralism offers slogans that smooth over contradictions but fail to answer people’s lived realities. The Marxist position is different. It exposes imperialism as the engine of displacement; defends migrants and refugees from scapegoating and violence; insists on fairness, regulation, and transparency; and, above all, unites the working class – Irish-born and migrant – against the real enemy: capitalism.

As Connolly warned, “the worker is robbed by the system that creates wealth for others.” Today that robbery continues. It is not the refugee in a Direct Provision centre who robs the Irish worker of a home, but the vulture fund sitting on thousands of properties. It is not the migrant family seeking shelter who robs us of services, but the comprador class that drains our resources into private profit.

The task is clear: redirect anger away from our neighbours and towards those who profit from division and misery. If we succeed, we can transform fear into solidarity, division into unity, and anger into the collective struggle for housing, sovereignty, and socialism. ■

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