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**Anticapitalist Initiative
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Socialist Resistance
Workers Power**

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Why we need Feminism in the movement

IS Network

The purpose of this piece is to address a number of realities women face under capitalism and in the movement, and outline what the IS Network have done over the past year to reconcile our socialism with our feminism. We think it is important to accept feminism as an intrinsic part of the movement. In doing so we hope our theory and activity will draw in self identifying women and other oppressed groups. We should learn from the experience and knowledge of established and organised groups such as Black Activists Against the Cuts (BARAC), Women for Women Refugees and the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, among many more. Our feminism should provide a platform for all of the oppressed and give voices to the voiceless. When women organised in the liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, they found that sharing their experiences helped bring about a body of knowledge. They could use this to organise and campaign to bring about change for women. Women's refuges were set up, which brought violence out of the home and into the open. This piece does not seek to theorise why oppression exists, but rather observe the prevalence of poverty and inequalities among the worst oppressed groups under capitalism. We must do this if we wish, and we do, to bring more women and other oppressed groups in to the struggle.

Women and Austerity

In the UK, 40% of women from black, ethnic and minority communities live below the poverty line. Women are disproportionately affected by the bedroom tax - 1 million more women claim housing benefit than men - and are very often single mothers. Women are forced to pay the bedroom tax, even if all bedrooms are occupied by children, because same sex children are expected to share a bedroom up until the age of 16 and girls and boys up until the age of 10. Women are disproportionately affected by the housing benefit caps in 4 London Borough areas. The reality is, women stay in their communities for a whole host of reasons, including having social networks within the community, which means accessible childcare from family and friends and sustainable housing for their families.

BME communities are the worst affected by the scrapping of EMA and the tripling of tuition fees, according to Zita Holbourne of Black Activists Against the Cuts (BAPAC), because they are some of the poorest communities as a result of layers of oppression. The removal of access to education for the poorest communities will trap women, men and children in poverty. Social mobility is at an all time low and the worst affected will be the lowest paid and the poorest in society – women and women in BME communities.

Migrants and BME communities are being threatened with further state surveillance by the Immigration Bill. Landlord's are expected to carry out checks on tenants' immigration status, according to government proposals, which means people from BME groups are more likely to be targeted by the policy. Migrants and their families may also have to wait 5 years to access free healthcare, creating an apartheid state. Some workers and tax payers are able to access free healthcare on the NHS, whereas others will be forced to take out private insurance, pay upfront fees or get in to debt.

A recent case of a pregnant woman, visiting her husband on a visitor visa, was forced to carry her dead unborn baby, because she was unable to afford private healthcare to remove the foetus. The unnamed woman's visa was due to expire and under new immigration rules, she would have been prevented from obtaining a new visa if she had NHS debts of £1000 or more, to prevent 'health tourism'.

Feminism and the Movement

Firstly, we have a lack of women and other oppressed groups in the movement, and the women we do have are often over worked, as we attempt to compensate for our under-representation. The argument against the quota system in Left Unity recognises women's under-representation, arguing that quotas will not bring about an overall gender balance within the organisation. Women however, often hold low paid jobs such as care, support work, teaching, nursing and social work. We are more likely to be in a position to bring other women and minority groups we work with into the movement. Women also have a different shared experience to men, such as our experience of sexual violence and structural inequality – women are poorer than men. The government's austerity agenda uproots the structures women have fought for, the structures that canalleviate some of the worst effects of capitalism. In 2012, after local authorities reduced the funding of women's refuges by 31%, 28 thousand women were turned away from the first refuge they approached. This shows us how undervalued

women are and why we need to fight. A gender balance recognises the importance and value of women's experience.

IS Network's Practical Solutions

The IS Network was formed by comrades who left the SWP because of structural sexism within the organisation. We decided early on that we were not going to be complicit in the cover up of the rape of a teenage woman, by the then National Secretary of the organisation. The experiences of women were ignored. The SWP lacked an up to date analysis of women's oppression. Safe spaces were prohibited in the SWP, so women were unable to caucus or publish literature by women, for women.

When the IS Network was formed, we decided to establish a healthy culture very early on and came out of the first conference with policies to that effect. Our constitution allows for all members who identify as being from an oppressed group to caucus, and a representative of established caucuses to sit on the Steering Committee.

The leading bodies, the Steering Committee, the Publications Group and the Complaints Group must be made up of 50% or more women and if there are not enough women to fill the quota, spaces should be left open for them and action should be taken to co-opt and encourage women to stand for leading positions.

The start of the IS Network was a very exciting time and women comrades began discussing and reading feminist literature and the different waves of feminism. We understand class is a major determining factor in the material circumstances of women, men and children. We recognise however that there has been a failure on the left to identify flaws in our movement, such as why politics is dominated by men, yet women are poorer, are worst affected by austerity and very often work harder than men. We failed to have a better understanding of the world around us than even the liberal press. The Guardian has published articles highlighting the fact women have to work harder in their professions than men to get a promotion, they make up 91% of single parents, and there is social pressure of them to be housekeepers, child bearers and nurturers of their children.

So what now then?

Any move towards unity is welcome. None of us are large. We are however all principled, and committed to tackling the marginalisation and oppression of women inside and outside of our organisations. There must be an ongoing dialogue within the unity talks about how to ensure the safety and representation of all oppressed groups within our organisations. It is through this that we will organise a force that can tackle oppression not only within the movement but within society.

Toni Mayo & Kat Burdon-Manley

The need for a working class women's movement

Workers Power

Working class women across the country are confronting austerity and winning local battles. Bringing these class fighters together to forge a working class women's movement has the potential to bring the cuts government to its knees, argues Joy Macready

You can hear the rumble. Snippets here and there, up and down the country. Impressive victories for Save

Lewisham Hospital campaign and the Scottish Anti-Bedroom Tax Federation; a march in Canterbury to save children's centres; health workers in Leeds and Bradford walking out against cost-cutting; Glasgow and Doncaster care workers striking against pay cuts and longer hours; and now teachers are preparing for a national strike on 26 March over worsening of pay, pensions and conditions.

Working class women are taking to the streets and finding the courage to fight back, at a time when the union leaders are showing an appalling lack of appetite for struggle. These fighting campaigns are not exclusively made up of women, but they are a growing majority.

Working class women are at the forefront because they have no buffer to protect themselves from these vicious attacks. When a local nursery is shut down, it is women who have to work part-time to look after their children because other childcare is too expensive; when care in the community is slashed, it is women who have to look after family and neighbours.

Together, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our working class brothers, we can turn this constant stream of rebellion into a torrent.

The reality of austerity

Working class women are bearing the brunt of austerity. They are shouldering a severe burden as a result of cuts to benefits and public services imposed by the government since they came to power in May 2010. And there are still more cuts coming down the pipeline: £60 billion over the next four years.

As well as caring for children, women are carers for disabled relatives and for parents in their later years; so the Bedroom Tax, the cuts to Disability Living Allowance and to local authorities' elderly care fall more heavily on their shoulders.

Meanwhile real earnings have declined, involuntary part-time employment has increased, and for the first time in five years the gender pay gap has widened, now standing at 15.7 per cent. Women pensioners suffer the greatest gap, on average receiving £6,500 a year less than men.

In addition, out of every 100 jobs created in the private sector, only 37 have gone to women. In the public sector, where a majority of women work because benefits such as maternity, parental and care leave are better, an estimated 700,000 workers are expected to lose their jobs by next year. In addition, a shocking 50,000 women lose their jobs while on maternity leave each year.

Cuts to legal aid will disproportionately affect women, as it is no longer available to women who need to use the courts in relation to child contact and divorce, unless they can "prove" domestic violence.

Women also face a double-discrimination as migrants and as members of ethnic minority communities, and have been especially scapegoated as such in the context of prolonged economic stagnation. Muslim women have been targeted for wearing the veil and subjected to increased violent attacks.

These are all reasons why we need to fight for a working class women's movement today.

Building a movement

But what would a working class women's movement look like? What would it fight for?

A working class women's movement would link up action groups, campaigns and caucuses in different unions and communities, building working class action to fight for its demands. Strikes, occupations and solidarity would be central.

In almost every big class struggle, like the Great Miner's Strike, women have begun to organise in their own groups, either building solidarity or as a way of raising their own demands in the male-dominated labour movement. Women need a broad and active movement to fight for their immediate demands, with the political capacity and leadership to take those struggles further and secure genuine advances for women.

In addition to fighting back against the cuts, a working class women's movement would raise specific demands to combat women's oppression, such as domestic violence and rape, discrimination at work, the lack of abortion and contraceptive rights, inequalities in pay, inadequate childcare and healthcare, sexist culture, etc.

Many of these demands will also resonate with middle class women that are being thrown back by austerity. And in calling for a work

Intersectionality – not the basis for the liberation struggle

The methodology of 'intersectionality' is currently gaining increased support on the left in the UK. Joy Macready argues why it shouldn't be used as the basis for a socialist approach to liberation

'Intersectionality', or the study of how multiple systems of oppression or discrimination interact, is gaining prominence amongst the left in the UK. For example, in the lead up to the Left Unity founding conference on 30 November, the Equalities Commission has suggested that the new organisation "adopt a form of approach to liberation politics based on intersectionality".

In many meetings, particularly in the student and academic milieu, this approach is held up as the way to recognise diversity and address the sexism, racism, homophobia, etc that can manifest within the left, trade unions and broader social movements – by highlighting how these oppressions overlap in the everyday lives of people to produce an identity that is unique to them in degree and composition.

It is understandable how, on the surface, intersectionality seems like a progressive approach to liberation. As its proponents argue, it gives the most vulnerable in society a "voice" that challenges the dominant paradigm of white, male, heterosexual, binary gendered, able-bodied and class privilege.

However, what intersectionality obscures is the importance of the question of class within all liberation struggles, whether women, black people, LGBTQ, or disabled and other oppressed sections of society. It effectively treats class as another category of oppression.

Of course class is not a "trump card" of oppression, being a worker does not make you more oppressed than any other, but starting from a class analysis enables us to locate the essential *agency* for socialist revolution: the working class; female and male; gay, straight and trans; black, Asian or white; disabled or not; and from all nationalities.

Socialist revolution not "only" opens the road to all liberation, but without it liberation is impossible. However, this does not mean that the struggle against oppression must wait for socialism or subordinate itself to a narrow and economistic definition of the class struggle.

The struggle against oppression, in society in the labour movement and in the revolutionary organisation, is an integral part of the socialist programme. The fact that some organisations that claim to be Marxist, Leninist or Trotskyist have ignored this and behaved in the most economistic and outright sexist way does not mean that the Marxist approach to this question must be rejected.

Intersectionality origins

Black American feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term "intersectionality theory" in 1989. However, many feminist academics locate its origins in black feminist politics a decade earlier, specifically the Combahee River Collective, an organisation of black lesbian socialist-feminists active in Boston who advanced the concept of "simultaneity". They wanted to expose the fact that the white, heterosexual middle-class woman's perspective, that they believed dominated the feminist movement, didn't represent the totality of that movement. In the Collective's statement, they wrote:

"This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression..."

Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality was developed in response to the identity politics that came to dominate the feminist movement in the 1980s. She wrote: "When we don't pay attention to the margins, when we don't

acknowledge the intersection, where the places of power overlap, we not only fail to see the women who fall between our movements, sometimes we pit our movements against each other.”

However, what these different strands of feminism have in common, despite their important insights into how gender is constructed by institutions, ideology, the family, society, etc, is that it is a pan-class ideology and therefore cannot put forward a consistently materialist world-view, because it either does not recognise capitalism and class, or regards these categories as being only another oppression, not especially more or less fundamental than another.

These movements are therefore condemned to be “sectional” (as also are other “autonomous” movements of the oppressed, like black nationalism, gay liberation, etc), effectively approaching the struggles of other oppressed groups as potential allies with whom one strikes agreements on the basis of a sort of “activists’ diplomacy”.

Although intersectional politics arose in opposition to this, as a result of “sectional” identity politics’ inability to account adequately for the experience of people who suffer from more than one oppression, it nevertheless addresses the problem either by reducing the sectional basis of its proposed forms of organisation to a kaleidoscope of ever-narrower “intersectional” identities, or by reducing things to a matter of unique individual identities within a broad amorphous movement.

In addition, intersectionality effectively reduces things from the level of the politics of a collective to the level of individual choices about identity.

This can be clearly seen when intersectionality is used in common practice. In many social movements intersectionality collapses back into the very “hierarchy of oppression” conflicts it arose to combat, that is, the idea that those who can tick the greatest number of boxes (woman, transgender, gay, disabled, black, etc) deserve the most respect and political weight in a meeting. Whereas others have to “check their privilege” and acknowledge that those with greater oppression are more qualified to determine the course taken or the policies adopted.

Marxists should reject this approach. Just because a person subjectively experiences a specific form of oppression does not necessarily mean that they are best placed to come up with a strategy for liberation. Contrary to the Combahee River Collective’s statement, the most oppressed in society are not automatically the most radical, militant or revolutionary.

At every given opportunity, socialists should listen to and champion the struggles of oppressed layers in society, but we also can bring into those struggles a revolutionary strategy, based on consciousness of the class as a whole.

The Left Unity Equalities Commission draft tries to qualify an intersectional approach: “We don’t however in doing this take this approach on the basis of agreement with those who reduce the question of class to the question of an identity – but indeed none of the other issues we deal with directly are solely questions of identity but are based on material realities.”

But this evades the question of the working class as the driving force of revolutionary change. It is the working class and its organisations that can – providing it understands the nature of oppression and is constantly struggling against it – unite the oppressed and exploited in a common struggle against capitalism and all its oppressive manifestations.

Fighting oppression

The working class is the class with “radical chains” that cannot be broken except by uprooting capitalism and in doing so the last form of class society. This ending of class society is the objective and indispensable necessity for ending all forms of oppression. This includes those like racism that flow from slavery, colonialism and imperialism and those that flow from the oppression of women via the institution of the patriarchal family.

To this latter are related all the oppressions relating to sex and gender and the ideologies that sustain and defend it and oppress those who reject it or just live differently.

Marxists don't believe – as many opponents of Marxism and many bad Marxists claim – that just by seizing power and expropriating the capitalists will oppression vanish, anymore than classes and economic inequality themselves will do. Building socialism is precisely a process of struggle against all forms of oppression.

Moreover, long before the socialist revolution, revolutionaries and their organisations have to be champions of all the exploited and oppressed. Lenin famously stressed in *What is to be Done?* that “the Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects.”

Marxists have – since the days of Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai – long recognised that special organisations and movements of the oppressed inside and outside the revolutionary party are necessary to draw the maximum number of them into the struggle against capitalism and its inherent sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia etc. They also recognised that prejudices and oppressive behaviour exist amongst workers and revolutionary communists, and have to be constantly fought.

Instead of promoting intersectionality, socialists have their own methods to fight sexism, racism, homophobia, etc that can and do manifest themselves within a left organisation, trade union or other social movement – as recent events in the SWP have shown all too clearly. Socialists should advocate the right of women and other oppressed groups to caucus, that is, to meet to discuss any issues relating to their oppression and the struggle against all examples of sexism or oppressive behaviour, and should be able to submit proposals for dealing with these issues directly to the membership and the leadership.

But to restrict the making of a party's policy on these issues only to those who suffer a specific oppression will just bring us back to the old conflicts of the “hierarchy of oppression”. And to reject founding our politics on the subjective experience of identity certainly does not equate to the assertion that oppression doesn't matter, or must be “subordinated to the class struggle”, meaning to the trade union struggle or even to struggles by workers alone.

That is “economism” or “workerism”, and in no sense represents Marx and Engels' or for that matter Lenin and Trotsky's position.