

Women, Feminism and Socialism

A REPORT BY TRICIA DAVIS TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ON JANUARY 11th 1986

In the 1970s the Women's Liberation Movement opened up a second front of political struggle. What was at issue was not just a new importance within the political agenda for traditional women's demands. The central challenge of feminism was to the limited definition of what was considered political. Expectations about roles within the family, ideas about sexuality and about what constituted appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour, it was argued, were not determined by biology, nor were they simply individual choices. Relationships between men and women, unlike those between capital and labour, expressed a real mutuality but power was involved too. The conventional division between the public and the private determined women's relationship to paid employment and political activity and allowed men to function in both these areas against a private background provided by women. It also masked the many and complex ways in which privilege operated within the family and other personal relationships. Men's power was predicated on women's powerlessness.

The setting out of these ideas involved women in an enormous collective effort, but the ideas were not simply plucked from the air. What made a mass women's movement possible at this time was that some of the traditional ways in which the uneven distribution of power between men and women had been structured and secured were being reworked.

Post-war economic change had led to a shortage of labour which was met, in part, by the entry of married women into the labour market and particularly into jobs created by the expanding welfare state. At the same time the widespread availability of reliable contraception made the decision about if and when to have a child a more open one. This development along with the more liberal attitudes towards sexuality developed in the 60s consolidated a demarcation between biological reproduction and sexual pleasure. Most of the jobs which became available to women were low paid and the belief that motherhood was women's central role remained powerful, although definitions of what the role entailed were changing and women were offered a new status and responsibility as guardians of their child's psychological as well as physical welfare. The terms on which sexual morality was liberalised were also more beneficial to men than to women and preserved the split between the public and the private. Nevertheless new possibilities for economic and sexual independence were opened up to women and the scale of the changes enabled women to break the silence.

When Thatcher came to power in 1979 many feminists thought that the policies with which she was identified and the spirit of retrenchment which she had been able to mobilise would mark the end of the progress made by feminist politics in the previous decade. A combination of cutbacks in the public sector, an ideology which evoked Victorian values and a women's movement severely weakened by internal differences seemed to bode ill both for women's bid for independence and for the debates about the family, personal relationships and sexuality with which feminism was particularly identified.

This report sets out to look at three areas. Firstly it examines briefly what has happened to women in the last six years and

what this has meant for the ideas which feminism has expressed. Secondly it examines the response of the Labour and Trade Union Movement to changes in women's lives and to feminism. Finally it turns to the role of the Communist Party and particularly to how our event, *Women Alive*, can act as the focal point of the intervention we need to make.

Thatcherism and women

The tensions which feminism explored between women's domestic responsibilities and their role within the labour market and between the objectification of women and women's attempts to redefine themselves as subjects within sexual and other discourse are sharper than ever.

Domestic labour is no longer invisible. Surveys of its organisation conducted over the last six years, however, are unanimously pessimistic about the extent to which sex roles within the family have changed. Conducted amongst a wide variety of social and occupational groups, their findings apply irrespective of social class and whether or not the female partner is in paid employment. The entrenched nature of the division of labour within the home is illustrated most graphically by the 1984 Annual Report of the National Marriage Guidance Council. Women, it found, are giving up their jobs to save their marriages to unemployed men. This applied not only amongst low paid women workers where the deduction of the women's income from the man's benefit would create a financial loss to the family, but also more generally. A female breadwinner is still perceived as threatening to the male identity, whilst, from a different direction, new threats to women's independence within heterosexual relationships have been posed by acts of sabotage against the 1967 Abortion Act and by cutbacks in the NHS.

At the same time women's current situation within the workforce is qualitatively different from their position in the past. It is still the case that women work in a limited range of occupations and earn, on average, only 74% of the average hourly wage of men. A growing proportion of women workers, in addition, are in part time employment. In 1983/84 alone 213,000 part time jobs were created. It appears, however, that women now have a permanent position in the labour market. Increasingly too, women's experience of waged work coincides with the typical experience. This is not only because women make up a growing proportion of the workforce and could, if current trends continue, comprise half of it by the end of the decade. It is also because the restructuring of the economy is based on depressing wage levels in general.

Thatcherism as a programme for government and as a philosophy is not a seamless web. Within its parameters a battle is being fought out as to the role of the state in legislating on familial and sexual matters and it has not been possible for those groups and individuals who subscribe to the most traditional view of women's role to achieve all they might have liked. The limited changes which have been made, however, for example on the permitted grounds for abortion and for the time limit for abortions performed in the private sector, are all the more effective in that they have been combined with