

## On Process and Struggle in the SOCIALIST FEMINIST MOVEMENT

We are members of an open planning group set up to pull together a long overdue discussion on issues in the women's movement. We are unified around a commitment towards taking the women's movement forward in the struggle against capitalism-imperialism and the particular oppression of women. Not surprisingly, the differences which emerged in the planning group reflected the divisions in the overall movement. The resistance to struggle which we came up against was disturbing. The struggle itself was healthy. As dodging conflict seems to be a trend in the women's movement and in the movement in general we felt it was our responsibility to explore and discuss our analysis of this pattern.



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When we say "the personal is political and the political is personal" we mean two specific things. First that our personal, so-called "private" choices are in fact political choices and, more specifically, are class choices, class statements. We demonstrate our class solidarity (or lack of it) through our "personal" actions. It's what you do that counts. Second, our personal lives are determined by the material conditions of our lives and the socialization process which results from those material conditions. Our emotions, our personalities are not arbitrary, isolated, unrelated. Rather, they are the collective product of material forces in our society. As women, traditionally confined to the "private", personal sphere of family life, we can clearly see, in our everyday lives, how the personal is political.

Upholding that the personal is political has been a great achievement and contribution of the women's movement. It has helped us, both women and men, to understand capitalism as a whole. We have begun to see capitalism as an all-encompassing system which dominates our work, our culture, our personal relationships, our kitchens, and our bedrooms. By this clearer understanding of how capitalism infects everything, we are better able to fight it.

Unfortunately, the socialist-feminist movement has applied these insights in a self-defeating way. The personal/political analysis has been distorted and used as a shield

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to avoid struggle. The movement has too often been unable or unwilling to engage in principled debate and serious criticism/self-criticism. This avoidance of struggle did not result from the personal/political analysis; rather it had its roots in the anti-materialist outlook that "all women are sisters". This outlook, in effect, denies class struggle and upholds unity at all costs. But the personal/political analysis has been used to "justify" the lack of struggle. The movement has failed to understand that "the personal is political" does not mean that correct ideas are held by "nice" people, that incorrect ideas are held by "bad" people, and that ideological struggle therefore equals personal rejection. Struggle, discipline, criticism have too often been viewed in emotional terms. The search for new understanding and strategies, the ability to reject incorrect ideas, has often been blocked by a kind of emotional blackmail which members of the movement have exercised over each other.

One result of ignoring struggle has been the failure of the movement to push itself forward, develop new strategies and broaden its class base. Another result has been the creation of a superficial "unity" which has left unexplored real and serious divisions within the movement. These contradictions within the movement will never be worked out by ignoring them, but, rather, only by confronting them openly. Without such struggle, the movement cannot develop new strategies to effectively fight women's oppression and capitalism. In a class society, struggle is absolute and constant, and is particularly intense in the material lives of Third World and working class women. Making the "personal choice not to struggle is a statement of class privilege. If we back away from principled struggle on this level, how can anyone believe we'll struggle resolutely (and effectively) against the real enemy?

The socialist-feminist movement has not only reflected but actually maintained within itself the oppression of women. Traditionally, leadership, objectivity, discipline, and criticalness have been defined (especially by men) as male characteristics. Women have been defined as subjective, undisciplined, uncritical. We should have rejected the definition of ourselves as weak and passive. Instead, we accepted the claim that men have a monopoly on strength and the ability to struggle We, too, defined leadership, strength, discipline, struggle, as male (perhaps because this was easier than struggling against our socialized passivity?) and chose instead "consensus" politics. In searching for a new politics, we re-affirmed the old (sexist) definitions of ourselves. These definitions oppress us as women and hamper our effectiveness to fight capitalism.

We do not advocate that socialist feminists adopt "male" politics; we simply reject the idea that struggle is male. We affirm that change comes only through struggle, and we refuse to relegate the process of revolutionary change solely to men, both for their sakes and ours. As fighters against our oppression under capitalism, we must struggle. This means openly confronting our contradictions, even at the expense of "unity". It means engaging in disciplined criticism/self-criticism and principled debate without

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retreating behind a shield of emotional obligations and personal ties and histories. It means, in short, the end of liberalism.

In struggle,

Kathy Engdahl

Lynn Foster

Phoebe Jones

Susie Linfield.

Gracie Schwartz

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