WOMEN & THE TORY OFFENSIVE

10p

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AN IMG PAMPHLET

Introduction

a case in point

With the imposition of the three-day week - more accurately characterised as the two-day lock-out- women have found themselves bearing much of the brunt of the Tory offensive. Those who are housewives, dependent on their husband's earnings, must trim household budgets to suit reduced wage packets. Those who are among the eight and a half million women with an additional job outside the home have had to contend with employers, determined to obtain the best part of five days' production from three days' work - regardless of the effort required and the disruption of home life.

Women are traditionally the most pliant workers - for reasons this pamphlet will examine. But some have confronted the bosses with exceptional militancy. Jean Jepson is one.

Jean Jepson, T&GWU Convenor at Armstrong's Patents, in Beverley, Yorkshire, was sacked in January for refusing to sign away an agreement guaranteeing 40-hours' basic pay. With the imposition of the three-day week, the management was anxious to cut its wages bill, but the national engineering agreement meant that it was obliged to pay £18 a week to its women workers irrespective of the time lost through the 'emergency' power regulations. Abandoning this guaranteed week would have effectively meant accepting a forty per cent wage cut for the already low-paid work force, and Jean Jepson refused to do it. The management ignored all procedure and sacked her immediately. A strike to reinstate her began at once and despite the union's reluctance to take up her case, the fight is continuing.

'I was acting to the official union instructions,' Jean Jepson explains, 'which were that no local branch official has the authority to sign away an agreement negotiatied at national level. I was acting in the best interests of the membership, many of whom are women, who would have suffered finanacial hardship.

'I was not willing to participate in what amounted to the people at large subsidising the company through unemployment benefits - much reduced for women - while the workers involved suffered financial hardship as the result of the three-day week introduced by a Tory Government which the company makes political contributions to every year. The whole deal was absolutely immoral.'

This dispute is a direct result of the Tory Government's policy for dealing with the present crisis at the expense of the working class. It is this Tory offensive, its particularly severe effects on women, whether at work or in the home, and the way it can best be met by the working class movement, that this pamphlet deals with. It is written for everyone who has ever had to face low pay, discrimination on the grounds of being a woman, and the problems of 'making ends meet' with the ever dwindling value of housekeeping money as prices soar and while wages are shackled.

The Tory Offensive

The policy of any capitalist government, Tory or Labour, when confronted with a crisis is very simply to solve it at the expense of the working class. Before trade unions were formed employers responded to crises - such as over production - through massive wage cuts and immediate lay offs. Since the development of working class organisations for the defence of living standards - the trade unions- employers find this much more difficult.

In periods of acute crisis, the State steps in more and more to aid the employers. It intervenes in a variety of ways - by placing controls on money supplies and the charges for borrowing money; by investing in industry; and more directly - by openly confronting the trade unions. If all else fails, the ruling class may opt for open military intervention and there are already indications, such as the Heathrow army-police manouevres, that they are preparing to pull this card from the pack.

The ruling class is now faced with the worst balance of payment deficit of any capitalist country. It presently stands at £2000 million, and is likely to double with the oil situation. Britain has a 10 to 15 per cent rate of inflation, which is once again higher than that of any other capitalist country, and a rapid decline in productivity. The Tories' policies were designed to alleviate the position of the ruling class.

They began by blaming the unions for all economic ills. They brought in the Industrial Relations Act 'to establish a legal framework for trade unionism' - that is a legal straight-jacket for every trade unionist who struggles for higher wages in an attempt to offset higher prices.

Then they introduced the Housing Finance Act. In this one bill they achieved two objectives: the working class now bears the brunt of the cost of increasing interest rates through higher 'fair' rents, while the better paid workers subsidise the lower paid, thus opening up potential divisions between workers and thus insuring that the super profits of the capitalists remained untouched.

The most blatantly anti-working class policy is the so-called counter-inflation policy - with its <u>real</u> Pay Board and its <u>fake</u> Price Commission.

The purpose of all this legislation is to re-distribute wealth by a soaking of the poor to feed the ailing profits of the rich. The 'counter-

inflation' policy, for example, gives employers a whole range of 'allowable costs' which they can pass on to the working class in the form of higher prices. But working class people have not one single 'allowable cost' - not even the increased cost of staying alive, for instance - which they can pass back to the employing class in the form of higher wages or salaries.

Inflation means one thing to the capitalist investor and something quite different to working people. The capitalist class sees the problem as one of declining profits and the decreasing value of the pound on the world market.

For the working class, inflation means rising prices, housing shortages and higher rents, declining standards of education, health and other social services. So when the Government legislates to cut public expenditure and hold down wages, it shows exactly whose inflation problems it is trying to deal with.

But in many cases the Government does n ot have to introduce new legislation. It simply unearths old and long forgotten acts, such as the 1875 Conspiracy and Protection of Private Property Act - with which it has already put three building worker pickets in jail for up to three years for 'conspiring to prevent others going about their lawful work'.

Or it re-interprets laws to its own ends - like a House of Lords decision made in December which means that a picket can now be charged under the Highways Act with obstruction for standing in front of a lorry at a factory gate in order to talk to the driver about a strike.

This is all part of the Tory offensive. Effective picketting ensures the success of any strike. And strike action is an important weapon the working class can use to meet the attacks on their living standards.

Women and the Tory Offensive.

Women are particularly affected by the Tory offensive. Women are entering the workforce at increasing rates - 56 per cent of all women aged from 15 to 59 are working, comprising one third of the total work force.

But they are, on average, paid only 50 per cent of male rates. Recent Department of Employment figures show that for manual work, men earn on average £38.1 per week, women £19.1. For white collar workers, this differential is even larger - men average £48.1, while women earn £24.7 Any rise in prices has a particularly sharp effect on low paid workers, the largest group being women.

A woman's role in the family - as the one who has to purchase the shopping with the dwindling value of her 'house-keeping' money forces her to carry the brunt of the problems of inflation. She has to spend more time hunting for bargains and she must forfeit expensive pre-cooked or semi-prepared meals.

She cannot afford to pay for toys or other things to keep children occupied. So she is left with more to do and less resources to do them with. And the recent spate of legislation directed towards women does little to alleviate this situation.

The Tories have traditionally relied on women for votes. In the 1970 general election, Heath could appeal to women, in their capacity as housewives by promising to 'cut prices at a stroke'. No one in her right mind would believe such a promise today.

So now the Tories are looking to other means of winning the women's vote. This has led them, particularly over the past year, to adopt contradictory policies. In attempts to consolidate their traditional supporters, they have introduced such typically conservative pieces of legislation as Mary Whitehouse's Anti-Obscenity Bill.

But they are also trying to extend their base of support among women - through conceding so-called advances around equal pay, family allowances, and anti- sex discrimination proposals. Upon closer examination, each of these 'concessions' does little to alleviate the condition of women - and often even serves to impede any possibility of change.

The possibility of increasing working women's wages under the pay laws are slim. In spite of the fact that equal pay leigslation is in operation, the effect of this act on women's earnings has been negligible. And with the Tory attack, any potential of substantial improvement has been destroyed.

Although the Tories wish to appear as if they are making consoessions to women, in reality they are offering mere crumbs.

Since 1970 when the Equal Pay Act (EPA) was passed, employers have been devising ways to escape paying equal wages. The basis of their reluctance can be seen clearly in the General Electric Company's claim that equal pay would add £243 million to its wage bill.

And if an employer is forced to pay equal wages, then as Mr. Donner, managing director of the Wakefield Shirt Company expalined, he will 'wherever possible, employ men to do the work now carried out by 1400 women at my six factories in Yorkshire and Wales... As the garment industry

becomes more automated machines are taking over most of the work. Machines require high investment and have to be worked for two or three shifts to become a profitable or even economic proposition. As legislation prevents women working night shifts then their replacement by men is inevitable. In fact, any company can apply to the government to allow women to work night shifts, but as one woman trade unionist has put it: 'If equality in this society means the opportunity to be as equally exploited as men, then I want a different society'.

Since the introduction of the pay laws, the Tories have speeded up the offensive against women on the labour market. The first phase of the pay laws - the total freeze on wages - made no allowance for increases towards equal pay. Phase Two was slightly more favourable at first glance. In addition to the £1 plus 4 per cent increases allowed, women would reduce the gap between male and female rates by one third.

It is significant that the Secretary of State for Employment could have ordered employers to pay women workers 90% of the male rate by the end of 1973. But the government chose not to enforce this and only allowed minimal advances to be made.

In addition, Maurice Macmillan argued at the TUC Conference on equal pay in early 1973, that if women wanted to make even more significant advances than the one third, they could simply persuade the men to give them a bit more of the 4 per cent agreement that could be negotiated. In other words, the Tories attempted to pit women against men workers. 'It's the men's fault, they can accept a bit less', according to government spokesmen.

A similar situation occurs under Phase Three. In this phase, 'orderly progress' may be made 'outside the pay limit' towards equal pay. By the end of 1974, the differential existing between men's and women's rates on November 7, 1973 may be reduced by up to a half (where the equal pay act applies).

Again, it means that when the maximum increase allowed - 7 per cent - is negotiated for all workers, the percentage difference remains the same, and another small increase can be negotiated for women. In most cases, the effect on differentials in cash terms will be barely noticeable. In spite of this, the Tories point to the inclusion of equal pay stipulation in their pay laws as evidence that they are concerned with the interests of women.

Anti-Sex Discrimination Proposals

Just as in equal pay, where the Tories wish to appear as providers to women, so their proposals on sex discrimination seem on the surface to deal with one aspect of women's situation. In even contemplating legislation on this question, the Tories are stepping outside of the traditional conservative world outlook. This proposal is therefore designed to attract women who are beginning to question the lack of opportunities for their sex - women who in the past did not consider themselves as potential Tory voters.

If looked at more closely, these proposals made in the recently published Green Paper - in no way deal with sex discrimination - besides an extremely vague section on educational opportunities, the major portion of the document deals with discrimination in industry. The crux of the report lies in the machinery proposed to deal with cases of discrimination and here the intent of the Tories is revealed.

This proposal recommends that any women (or man) who suffers from discrimination should utilise the National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC) machinery. For the unions having large numbers of women members, such as the AUEW, and who do not recognise the NIRC, it means their women members will have no place of appeal, without going against union policy.

More importantly, however, this is another policy designed to split the working class. If implement, it would encourage women to turn against male trade unionists who refuse to have any case referred to the NIRC.

In proposing NIRC machinery as the only 'legal' way to deal with cases of discrimination, the Tories are effectively proposing that women should be used as a striking force against the working class. But once again, they point to their Green Paper as proof that they have the interests of women at heart.

Nurseries

Another front on which the Tories claim they have advanced the interests of women is around the question of nurseries. Margaret Thatcher's report calling for expanded nursery facilities was hailed by the press as a victory for women's liberation. In fact, it bears little relation to the discussions and initiatives undertaken by womens liberation groups and will solve few of the child-care problems confronted by women workers.

The report projects that 50% of three-year olds and 90% of four year olds will have a place in the proposed nurseries in ten years time. Moves towards this expansion will begin in 1976 and in the recent slashing of social expenditure, this was one programme that remained untouched.

The basis of the report came from an earlier one - the Plowden report. Its major short-coming is that it calls for part-time facilities. Although it concedes that 'the refusal of full-time nursery places for children of working mothers may prompt some of them to make unsuitable arrangements for their children's care during working hours', it goes on to stipulate that 'mothers who cannot satisfy the authorities that they have exceptionally good reasons for working should have low priority for full-time nursery for their children.

Based on the idea that the natural mother has 'special' ties with her child in its 'formative' years, and failing to consider the economic situation which forces women to work, the provisions of the report will scarcely alleviate the situation of women most in need of nursery facilities.

Another draw-back is that local authorities will have to apply for nurseries in their area - and who will ensure that areas in the most need are the ones to get them? In addition, with the current shortage of nursery teachers for five-year olds and the lack of any plans to increase their numbers, many of the problems confronting the present facilities will only be compounded with expansion.

Family Allowances

In November 1972, the Tories published a green paper calling for the end of the cash payment of family allowances to women. In a proposal designed primarily to rationalise the social security system, an important side effect was to be the payment of family allowances to fathers, in the form of tax-credits.

Besides this negative aspect of the green paper, it also severly limited the number of people to be covered by the scheme - those not included were unsupported mothers, the unemployed and those on strike.

The underlying function of this proposal was a strengthening of the family unit. Women who don't work outside the home would no longer have part of their housekeeping money paid

directly to them. They would be totally reliant on their husband. The antics of the government through this proposal were extremely revealing. They totally underestimated what women's response would be and when it became clear that there was widespread opposition to this proposal, Heath was forced to completely change his position.

He told reports that although he was still committed to implementing the scheme, he was prepared to continue paying family allowances to women. The media projected Heath as a defender of women's rights.

The next document to be issued on the subject by the government - the White Paper - showed a hasty retreat. It not only recommended that family allowances should be paid to women, but also that the amount should be increased from 90p. to £2. per child, and that the first child should be included. But this 'concession' entails millions of pounds of additional expenditure. With the recent cutbacks in social expenditure, it is highly unlikely that if re-elected the Tories would be prepared to fulfill these promises.

Abortion and Contraception

The Health Services re-organisation scheme - yet another programme for rationalisation - will, if implemented, by a future government, curtail the availability of birth control, especially for young unmarried women. This scheme proposes that branches of the Family Planning Association should no longer be financed by local authorities - important source of their income at present. The functions of the FPA will now increasingly be taken over by local doctors.

The proposals contained in this report must be clearly linked to the phenomenal growth of such anti-abortion groups as the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children and Life. With over 80,000 supporters, mobilised around traditional and backward views concerning women, SPUC has provided the Tories with another potential basis of support - one which fits in very well with a traditional conservative outlook.

To maintain the type of society which these groups and the Tories - desire, it is necessary to maintain a stable family unit. It is in the family that women have children and with the aid of the schools, the Church, and the media, train them to fit into capitalist society. Therefore, they say a woman's place is in the home, and that this is a 'natural' state of affairs.

Anything which challenges this limited role for women, such as the liberal Abortion Act of 1970, is seen by these groups as highly dangerous. They are fighting to restrict the abortion law and the Health Services proposals can be seen as a first step in this direction. We can project that if SPUC continues to grow, further restrictions will be on the agenda.

Three Day Week

In the current crisis, the most vicious onslaught of the Tories has been to impose a three-day work week, and there is already talk of a two-day week. Designed to isolate the miners from the rest of the working class it has been one of the most vicious attacks affecting the entire working class.

The imposition of the three-day week has especially affected women. For women who do not have a job outside the home, the effects are immediate. They have to budget and cut corners in their role as 'consumer' to try and make ends meet on their husband's diminished wage packet.

For women workers, there are other problems just as severe. When the week extended from Thursday to Saturday, it meant that special arrangements had to be made to look after the children on Saturdays, when schools and nurseries are closed. The difficulties in this situation were reflected in rates of absenteeism: employers were reporting higher rates each week.

The change away from Saturday work was not, however, designed to alleviate women's situation. Saturday work increased the wage bill as often overtime had to be paid. But since women were not willing or able to work on the weekend, the continuation of this policy became impossible.

In an attempt to cram as much work into one day as possible, employers have speeded up production, cut down on lunch breaks, and extended the working day by several hours - in many cases in flagrant breach of the Factory Acts, designed - in theory - as protective legislation. For women, with another job awaiting them at home, the extended work day imposes severe hardship. And restrictions on lunch breaks, often the only time when working women have time to shop during the week, just adds to the difficulty of carrying out household tasks.

Speed ups have affected women in a number of ways. Knitting machines in the hosiery trades have been speeded up to 32 rows a minute from the recommended 24. Other regulations, such as the use of fencing devices, have been

abandoned during the crisis - safety equipment which slows down production is quickly thrown out. Also, in some cases, office workers are pushed to speed up so that they can help on the shop floor - all in the aid of production.

And in various trades dominated by women, such as tailoring and textiles and hosiery, management has provided women with portable machines so the production can continue, but in the home, not the factory, where the overhead costs of electricity are paid by the women themselves.

The effect of this on women's wages, already grossly underpaid, is obvious. But not only do employers cut wages outright, they have introduced various schemes to make even further deductions. For example in Leeds, women in the rag trade found they made as little as £5 after management had subtracted three days' holiday money which had been paid over Christmas. And married women can not claim social security benefits to make up their wages in the way male workers can.

Many of the special problems women confront in the workforce are directly related to their position in the family. The recent barrage of legislation passed by the Tories is based on a traditional view of women - viewing them first as wives and mothers. In order to fight the Tory offensive, it is important to understand exactly how the oppression of women is rooted in the family.

Women and the home

"I can't go on the picket line today", the shop steward explained, "I've got to get my husband's dinner".

There is probably nothing in our society which is generally considered so 'normal' or 'natural' as the family. For that reason, socialists - who after all want to change society -should pay special attention to it.

On the face of it, the family appears simply to be a man and a woman living together and having children. Yet probe a little deeper, and it is clear that just society changes, so does the form of the family. In feudal times, for example, the family was the unit of production for many goods - men, women and children all helped to produce the food and clothing necessary for existence. Even in the early stages of capitalism, industry was located in the home.

With industrialisation, production moved from the home to the factory or workshop. This shift had severe repercussions for women. They were still expected to carry out domestic tasks, but because the male wage was insufficient to sustain the family, women were also forced to leave the home to work. Employers used a variety of arguments to justify paying women workers meagre wages and to ensure that they would have a cheap supply of labour in reserve. They argued that because women bore children, they were only 'transient' workers. Besides, women's PRIMARY job was in the home - women who worked were only 'supplementing' family income.

Over a century later, this type of argument is still being used by employers, despite the fact that women only spend on the average, four years in a state of pregnancy or nursing a child through the first year of life. In comparison, women in the 1890's spent 15 years. Increasingly, child-bearing and child-rearing are used synonymously by employers, to the detriment of women. For single women or 'female-headed households' - one in five households in Britain today - wages are paid on the unfounded assumption that every woman is part of a family unit.

The family as we know it, is crucial in maintaining society. It is not simply just a man, a woman and children living together - they live together in a particular way, with particular roles cut out for each, and with a particular overall purpose.

This can be seen most clearly in the old idealised version of the family which churches still preach. A man and a woman bind themselves together in a life-long union, excluding sexual relations with all others, and they have children who must obey them. Furthermore the wife must obey her husband and look after him, while he, as head of the household, has primary responsibility for the welfare of the rest of the family.

This idealised version has been slightly modified, of course - but the essence remains the 'norm'. Divorce is legally possible; in practice, high costs, social stigmas, and the problems facing women bringing up children on their own, often make it extremely difficult. Churchmen debate whether to delete the word 'obey' from the woman's marriage oath, but battered wives are a common place. Extra marital relations are popularised in the so-called 'permissive' society, but are often posed as a way to invogorate a 'tired marriage'. And although children may not be expected to

obey their parents, 'in all things', they have no alternative to living with the family, however oppressive the state institutions.

Historically, the family was crucial in concentrating and maintaining wealth - for the early industrialists, this was a question of life and death as the prospect of individual enterprise depended on its relative size in comparison to its competitors. Marriage for the capitalists was primarily an economic consideration. Very simply, the wealth of two industrialists united through marriage ties improved economic propspects in a period of intense competition, and the children of this marriage inherited the wealth thus maintaining its concentration and continuity.

The working class family did not have (and continues not to have, by definition) and such wealth to accumulate. The economic considerations in working class marriage arose from the impossibility, especially for women, of existence outside of a family structure. Women's 'supplementary wages' without any aid from the state left little alternative for unmarried women than seeking a husband.

And because women's part in productive labour was restricted through her role in reproduction - having babies necessitates leaving work temporarily - she was unable to support herself without the aid of a family during pregnancies. Today, inspite of wider availability of birth control and limited benefits from the state, the women still find it difficult to bring up children on their own. Marriage for the working class merely facilitates existence, it isn't a means to increase one's power.

Yet the ruling class continually glorifies the family. It passes reams of legislation designed to reinforce the family unit, it perpetuates pervasive myths so everyone believes the family is a 'natural' phenomenon, and it is reticent to take any steps which endangers its continued existence. What is the basis for this deep concern?

The Function of the Family Under Capitalism

The family is an institution whose primary task is to produce and raise children. For the capitalist, this is of central importance. If he has no workers, he can't make any profits. What the family does is to ensure not only that there will be future generations of workers, but that these workers will be produced as cheaply as possible and will also be willing workers. Additionally, it ensures the

maintenance of the present generation of workers at an unbelievably low cost.

The burden of this task, of course, falls upon women. But because all the work involved is 'hidden labour' having no exchange value on the market, because it is privatised in each individual household, it is not regarded as 'real' work. Although capitalists, in paying male wage earners, consider the maintenance of the family, in addition to the individual worker, it is interesting to note the extent of this unrecognised work of women. Domestic labour, if measured in terms of productive labour, is phenomenal. In Sweden, 2340 million hours a year are spent by women in housework, compared with 1290 million hours spent in industry. And the Chase Manhatton Bank estimates a woman's overall work week at 99.6 hours. However, although women are moving into the labour force in increasing numbers - now reaching almost 40 percent of the total work force - they are still responsible for this 'hidden labour' and are first and foremost defined by their role in the family.

The private nature of family life forces and reinforces a division of labour between the man and the women. Because of his economic position - as breadwinner, he usually has the whip hand. The woman gets the shit jobs: washing, cleaning and cooking. This role of 'housewife' thus becomes the norm for women, affecting all whether married or single, young or old. Girls in the family are trained to accept this responsibility and help their mothers. And single women workers outside the home are viewed as temporary workers, because they will eventually marry. Then both jobs will continue but tasks in the home will be primary.

This role by women in the home affects women at work too - the type of work generally considered 'women's work' is simply the extension of household duties. Correspondingly, the low status of domestic work is reflected in low rates of pay. Male workmates undervalue a woman's worth in relation to theirs and so allow employers to get away with paying them lower wages....thereby in the long run undercutting theirs. Women workers themselves in many cases, see the question of euql pay as an issue to be settled between man and wife and not between workers and employers. And although militant trade unionists (male) may realise what low pay for women means in the long run, their solution is all too often to get rid of women workers, not to fight for equal pay for women. Women are thus placed in a special low status position by men workers, much like black workers: indeed male chauvanism and racialism both serve one important

function for the ruling class - they divide workers against each other preventing unity in the face of the employer.

The family is not unaided in fulfilling its task of producing the right kind of future labourers. The education system, religion, the media all help to produce people who accept society as it is. They all project a view of women as 'naturally' passive, dependent, and submissive beings who exhibit unique characteristics suiting them to particular occupations - they are good with children and kind to the weak (teaching and nursing) they look after men (secretaries and shorthand typists); they are neat fingered (routine manual work).

In the media, this view of women is used to sell products, Buying the right soap powder, food, or babies nappies is the hallmark of a good mother, just as a shiny house - created with the aid of expensive gadgets and products - is the hallmark of a good housewife. And women cannot be attractive unless she uses the right brand of toothpaste, shampoo, or deodorant.

In this way, the role of woman in the family has been over-emphasised - and for very good reasons. It is in this connection that women are assured by the ruling class they have some power in society. It is argued that the 'crucial' decision of how the wages of the nation are to be spent is entrusted to women. Upon closer scrutiny quite the opposite is true. What kind of 'power' comes from making a myriad of decisions each day about what brand or what size of commodity is purchased? Decisions to buy particular kinds of products, which are all designed to wear out as quickly as possible at any rate, are meaningless. Power in society comes from controlling the means of production.

The best means of defence...

What we are experiencing is an attack from many directions at once - on our standard of living and our right to organise to defend it. The employers have gathered under the Tories' umbrella, and we find ourselves faced not just with the attacks of individual employers, but by the legal apparatus of the State.

The law says how much our rent will be, how high our wages can go. It allows for increased costs and restricts such basic trade union rights as picketting. So despite the fact that it is <u>their</u> crisis, of <u>their</u> making, the capitalist profiteers are on the offensive against us to force us to

accept their solutions to the problem.

Can we, under these circumstances, afford to remain on the defensive? Are we, the women, going to be bought off by the 'crumbs' and taken in by the lies? Are we going to leave it up to the state, for example, to deal with cases of sex-discrimination, to legislate for equal pay and to provide safe birth control devices? Clearly the government of the ruling class is designed to protect the interests of that class.

How can discrimination be effectively dealt with by the capitalist's government when it is in their own interest to perpetuate it? Why should we rely on this type of government to enforce equal pay legislation when it has just shown it has no concern for the low pay of women by imposing a three-day week - thereby cutting women's already low wages almost by half. And why would such a government legislate to provide when the driving force behind the society is to increase profits, not to care for the welfare of its people?

The Tories and the employers have already shown us that the best means of defence is attack. But on what basis should we go on the offensive?

> *The working women of the country know that the crisis is one which affects the lives of each of them. It is as though we watched a great revolving chain, each link contributed by a different section of the working class community. An injury to any of these will put out the whole mechanism. If a link is broken the chain will cease to revolve, industry will be paralysed and the workers and their families will crash to complete ruin. Today the capitalists of the coal industry are hammering at the link made by the miners. Shall we allow it to be broken?*
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> **Women and the Crisis. Issued May 8 , 1926 by the General Council during the General Strike.**

. . . . is attack

The miners are showing the way by going on the attack. In spite of a series of last minute government manoeuvres, the miners are on strike to win their demands and smash Phase Three. We must be prepared to organise in solidarity with their struggle. But not as Scanlon of the Engineering

Union sees 'solidarity' - by holding back our own claims and demands until the miners' struggle has been won. What is needed now is not another election promise, but the actual destruction of these pay laws. The miners know that their strength and power are atomised through the ballot box. They know that it is only by organising their collective strength through strike committees and solidarity committees that they can have any control over the struggle. The power of the working class is not exercised through the ballot box - that is merely where they register an opinion - their power is felt and exercised when they organise themselves to enforce the granting of their demands. When we confront those who are asking for our vote - we should ask what they are doing to support the miners strike.

The miners will again be picketing power stations and coal depots. They will again have to operate flying and mass pickets. They will need active support both during the struggle and later - to ensure that there will be no arrests after the event.

The Shrewsbury pickets were arrested six months after the building strike was over and this cannot happen again. It means the fight will be on two fronts - organising in their support and fighting for the removal of the Conspiracy Acts from the statute books. Convictions under this Act must be quashed.

We should be preparing to house the miners if they have to leave their own areas for picketing duties. Forces for the picket lines must be organised through picketing pools in all areas, composed of local workers prepared to strike in order to report for picket duty.

Miners wives and the wives of other strikers will need facilities - including accommodation, child minding facilities and communal canteens - to ensure they will take full part in these activities. In North London, Kingsgate women's centre has already been offered to the miners' wives. The support of other groups not directly involved, such as students, unions, Labour Party branches, women's liberation groups and squatters organisations is essential. They also have facilities necessary to accommodate miners on the move.

We must also be preparing to fight off other attacks which we could well face during the miners' strike - tenants committees to tackle the problems created by power cuts; the strikers families being unable to pay rent; problems with social security; the feeding of strikers' children,

and so on.

And those of us who are workers and trade unionists must not be prepared to let our own bureaucracies and employers off the hook. When we take strike action in solidarity with the miners, we must make it clear that we are also pressing for our own claims against Phase 3, even if these have been oficially 'settled' within the terms of the pay laws by our union bureaucracies.

We will not wait until the miners have won or lost to press our own demands. The workers of '26 who followed this road found themselves fighting a losing battle from a position of weakness after the general strike was over. We should not make the same mistake.

The Councils of Action were set up in 1926 during the General Strike to organise and centralise the struggle. Bodies similar to these must not only be recrated but expanded and extended. Just as the miners' strike demonstrates how the working class can begin to control the struggle they are in, so the Councils of Action must seek to do this for entire areas, through a national network for the whole country. These committees should not exist simply during the period of struggle but should continue on a long term basis to re-organise the struggle if necessary and to defend gains made or ward off any renewed attacks.

But organising in this way, creating local Councils of Action to organise all the forces in our area for this struggle, means developing a level of organisation and cooperation beyond that of the ordinary strike committee. It means bringing in representatives of all those who are contributing to the struggle - other strikers, other groups of workers, but also representatives from prices committees, tenants committees, local students and women's lib groups. All these forces will need to be drawn into a centralised body which can minimise the hardships to the working class and maximise their effectiveness.

Organising for the future

We must be quite conscious of what we are attempting to achieve by all this. If we simply sought to replace one government with another, we could do that through the election. But how do we guard against the possibility of similar attacks being launched against us in the near future by the new government, who will still be under pressure by the employers?

What we are attempting to do is to establish our strength, determination and ability to defy any government to try

and solve the problems of capitalism at our expense. We want guarantees on prices - not paper guarantees, but in the form of veto powers held by the workers' organisations and the councils of action - on prices, wages, housing, welfare, equal pay, and the picketing laws.

We want to develop in this coming struggle an experienced and determined leadership of the working class prepared to defend all gains made in the struggle.

So we must start to organise now, not just as trade unionists, but as women trade unionists to fight for our rights as workers and as union members. We should be pushing the fight for equal pay, because every penny we receive less than the rate for the job is an extra penny profit to our employers. We should learn the lesson of the women in engineering, however, on how to fight for equal pay and not let ourselves be regraded out of the fight and into the 'women's grade'. 'No Women's Grade' should be our slogan. And where they try and conceal the women's grade under a different name, eg. in TASS they have the tracer's grade, with 100% female membership, we should demand the abolition of the lowest grade.

Discrimination women workers face does not start and end with wages. We should be sending women trade unionists around to schools to encourage girls to take apprentices, to take part in the union when they have a job. We should be taking up the question of the percentages of girls in apprenticeships and the exclusion of girls, de facto, from many trades. The loss of promotion, wage grades and training chances because women have - or are expected to have - children at some stage. We should be concerned with the lack of maternity leave, guarantees of the job being held over the period of maternity leave, nursery facilities for working and non-working mothers.

The fact that our lives are not split into two distinct sections, work and home, but overlap and intertwine with one another is a two edged sword. It means, yes we have special problems as women, as women workers - but it also means it is easier for us to see that it is not enough to simply consider changes in the economy, or in the organisation of production. We know that this must be accompanied by changes in the care of children, the responsibility for the home and the responsibility for the family. We can start to establish this now by taking up in the unions the changes necessary to make a fight for equality at work meaningful.

We should not let ourselves be diverted from this fight by the attitude of the men (no women working while men are unemployed', 'they only work for pin money',) or the attitudes of other women ('my old man wouldn't like it if I got as much money as him'). Because it is only by organising ourselves and fighting for our rights that we will be able to destroy these backward attitudes for good - we will have proved that they belong to an image of women and not to reality.

Nor should we be diverted by assuming that the Government (Tory or Labour) will solve the problems forus. We must learn that only through our own organisation will equal pay, sex-discrimination, inadequate nurseries, and abortion and contraception be effectively challenged.

Any gains that we make as women, for women, must not be lost. If we can achieve this level of organisation, it will have involved breaking the isolation of women in the home, the relative passivity of many women workers and the traditional role of women as domestic workers.

If we can do this, we will have demonstrated that the isolation of women in the home can be broken, that the work the women does in the home can be organised communally; that women do have a role to play in such struggles; and that there is no law, written or unwritten, which says that women alone are responsible for and capable of looking after children, preparing food and undertaking housekeeping.

We will have taken the fight over prices out of the family where it is at present and into the realm of the class struggle where it belongs. And we will have started to break down the suspicious and patronising attitudes of many men to the involvement of women in what they (the men) consider to be <u>their</u> struggle, by demonstrating that it is also our fight and that we can and will play our part.

It will seem to many that the present time is one of confusion and increasing chaos. 'Normal' expectations, like a job, a house, and a gradually rising standard of living, are becoming the exception rather than the rule for many of us. 'Normal' relations between the trade unions and the employers; the trade unions and the government; the trade unions and the police; the police and the army; the employer and the state; are all in a state of flux.

So, what is 'normal' is not the state of affairs we have known from the end of the war until the middle 60's.

In fact, what is 'normal' for capitalist society, is rather a repeated cycle of crisis and stability, and what we had thought of as normal was in fact a short lived period of relative stability, inbetween crises. What has to be resolved in each period of crisis, is at whose expense stability will be achieved.

In the present crisis we will have to take many unfamiliar steps, away from our 'normal' responses, to make sure that this crisis is not resolved at our expense. This will mean, especially for women, breaking out of the traditional roles we play in the family, and will in turn mean involving men more directly with domestic and family responsibilities, and in finding a solution jointly to how these responsibilities can be shifted from the individual family to the community and the State.

We must not let arguments about what is 'normal' hold us back from breaking down the resistance to change and the backward ideas of male supremacy and male chauvanism which exist among the working class. In the short term this will weaken our solidarity and effectiveness. In the long term, it will distort the new form of society we are seeking to create.

Women in the 1926 General Strike

In St. Helen's, the Corporation, with a Labour majority, has voted £7,000 for free meals - three meals a day for school children of strikers' families.

Bulletin of the Merseyside Council of Action

The wife of the Prime Minister has made an appeal for women to take their part. This has been responded to by hundreds of women who have turned out to picket and assist strikers in Birkenhead.

Bulletin of the Merseyside Council of Action

A ludy teacher in Castlehill school is telling the children that student scabs are the saviours of our nation in this crisis.

Edinburgh Strike Bulletin

Lorry drivers in Hyde Park engaged in food services for the Government are being regaled with cups of tead by 'beautifully dressed smiling society girls'. This is the first time the two groups have met but there have been no fatal results reported so far.

Sunday Worker, May 1926

The Borough Council (with a Labour majority) are going to deal with the feeding of school children. Communal kitchens have been set up.

Strike Bulletin from Methyr Tydfil

At a meeting representing all the organisations of working class women in St. Pancras, arranged by the trades council, a permanent women's committee was elected. The work of the committee will include the organising of meetings, socials, special relief work and other activities....

The women's committee has started work and is getting a good response from striker's wives and others. This work is very important and a mass meeting for women will be arranged soon....

The question of profiteering is being taken up and if all cases of shops raising prices unnecessarily are reported to the women's committee they will be dealth with.

St. Pancras Bulletin Nos. 1,2,3.

A Woman's Food Protection Committee has been set up by the Bethnal Green Council of Action, for the purposes of checking the rpices of food stuffs.

Sunday Worker, May 1926