

The Defense of Women's Rights in the U.S. Today

by the Line of March Editorial Board

Introduction

A full scale assault on the rights of women is underway in the U.S. today.

Rallying under the banner of "defense of the American family," right wing political forces whose goal is to erase the gains won by the mass women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s have managed to capture the political and ideological initiative in the country on the question of women's role in society. This reactionary tide has already succeeded in stopping the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in its tracks, in effectively eliminating most federal funding for abortion, and in neutralizing if not reversing much of the mass sympathy for women's liberation that swept the nation a decade ago. And there is no let up in sight; on the contrary, the attack is intensifying with the latest danger the growing campaign to pass a "Human Life Amendment" (HLA) to the U.S. Constitution that would, in effect, make abortion the crime of murder.

In the face of this bitter assault, the once formidable movement for women's rights has faltered and been unable to mount an effective defense. The largest and best known force in the field, the National Organization for Women (NOW), remains dominated by a cautious and legalistic strategy that has proved ideologically unable to confront the right or to galvanize the necessary mass activism to regain the political initiative. The more left forces in the women's movement, meanwhile,

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have not yet recovered from the demise of the autonomous women's unions of the early 1970s and are too disunited politically and organizationally to enter the fray as a nationally coherent and effective force. And the communist movement, still gripped by its legacy of giving the question of women's oppression far too little attention, is hardly in the field at all.

And all this takes place in a period when U.S. monopoly capital is mounting an overall offensive against the U.S. and international working class, the New Right is a growing force on the U.S. political scene, and the working class and progressive movement is generally weak and on the defensive.

Given this unfavorable set of circumstances, it will require the maximum efforts of all those committed to the struggle against women's oppression to regroup our disoriented forces and reforge a movement capable of checking the present assault. As in all other arenas of the class struggle, this task places a particular responsibility upon the communists, specifically the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist trend, to provide leadership.

The first step in providing such leadership is to develop an accurate understanding of the precise nature of the present assault on women's rights. In our view, the key factor defining the present attacks is that the most vicious assault is spearheaded by forces of the mass-based New Right who base their actions on an ideological commitment to return women to their "traditional role" as mother and wife. Consequently, the political program defining the main features of the assault on women today consists of a series of measures that would enforce in life the reactionary slogan that "A Woman's Place Is in the Home." It is precisely the resistance to these measures, particularly the proposed outlawing of abortion, that presently occupies center-stage in the fight to defend women's rights.

Yet if the immediate spearhead of the attack on women originates from the mass-based New Right, the class needs of monopoly capital itself frame the political struggles of the present period and ultimately stand as the main barriers to women's emancipation. Today, the U.S. bourgeoisie is compelled by its class interest to increase its efforts to maintain systematic discrimination against women in the labor force and to intensify the special burdens of household responsibilities that women bear in U.S. society. As well, monopoly capital must lend new encouragement to all manner of previously neglected right wing political forces in order to win broad support for its policy of increased war preparations and massive social austerity. At bottom, it is precisely these moves by the dominant circles of the U.S. bourgeoisie that account for the political and ideological initiative enjoyed today by the reactionary forces of the New Right.

Despite the bourgeoisie's ultimately decisive role in reinforcing the

oppression of women, monopoly capital has not placed itself squarely at the center of those attacks—such as the drive to outlaw abortion—that are most immediately threatening to women and which have aroused so much moral fervor from the ranks of the New Right. The reason for this is that monopoly capital has an important contradiction with any program whose result would be to throw all or even most women completely back into the home. The long range trend of capitalist development—and the interest of the bourgeoisie—lies in progressively drawing more and more women *out* of the home and *into* social production, though of course on the basis of inequality and discrimination. Consequently, while the U.S. bourgeoisie has a crucial overlapping interest with the New Right in maintaining key elements of discrimination against women, and generally building a reactionary political consensus in this country, it has little interest in rigid ideological dogmas that run against the general direction of capitalist development and the bourgeoisie's own class interest. The political contradiction between monopoly capital and the New Right that results from this fact is one that can be utilized by progressive forces as we attempt to build the broadest possible movement in defense of women's rights.

And it is indeed possible to build a broad and powerful movement. The profoundly reactionary character of the right wing-led offensive against women, particularly the attack focused on abortion, lays the basis for a massive cross-class movement in defense of women's rights in the present period. The most active component of this broad alliance will undoubtedly be the women's movement itself. However, it is both possible and necessary to mobilize the entire working class and people's movement to participate in this vital fight.

The communists must not shirk from helping to forge and trying to give leadership to such a broad cross-class movement in the immediate defense of women's rights, recognizing from the outset the diverse and complex character this movement will take on as it develops. On certain issues, for example, it will be possible to build unity among forces ranging from feminist separatists to members of the Republican Party National Committee, while on other questions, various vacillating elements may stand aside from the fight or even side with reaction. Such twists and turns are inevitable, and communists should not be misled by their appearance to abandon the effort to forge the broadest possible front on each specific issue.

At the same time, precisely because of the broad class and political elements that such a movement can contain, communists must be alert from the beginning to the danger of the movement being dominated by bourgeois and petit bourgeois forces with anti-working class political lines. In particular, the communist forces must recognize that, even though some forces from the bourgeoisie itself may today oppose the most vicious aspects of the assault on women, *the bourgeoisie remains*

the strategic enemy of the struggle against women's oppression and the main obstacle to achieving women's emancipation.

Politically, this understanding must be reflected in communists exerting every effort to reforge an activist women's movement on the basis of a working class line even as we simultaneously build a broader front to blunt the present attack. For only a working class-based women's movement can maintain its bearings in the protracted battle with capital to achieve the liberation of the masses of women or effectively anchor the broad cross-class front that must be forged today.

The present article is an attempt to demonstrate the accuracy of this analysis and to map out some initial thoughts on how to reforge the women's movement on a working class basis. In the first section, we analyze in some detail the present attacks on women's rights and situate them within the context of the dramatic changes in women's role within U.S. capitalism that have taken place over the past thirty years. In the second section, we present in more depth our opinions on building an adequate defense against the present assault on women, on the line required to guide the reforging of the women's movement on a firm class basis, and on the role of communists in that sorely needed effort.

I. The Current Attack on Women's Rights

A. The Offensive of the New Right

For the past four or five years, a well organized and well financed effort to reverse the political and ideological gains made by women in the previous decade has been gathering momentum across the U.S. At the center of this effort lies a constellation of forces that have been collectively dubbed the New Right. Consisting of an array of forces ranging from the new Klan to the Moral Majority to the American Conservative Union, the New Right today counts its activist ranks in the thousands and its supporters in the millions. Though in the last two years or so the dominant circles of U.S. finance capital have looked with more favor than previously on the development of the New Right, and though this movement ultimately serves the interests of the bourgeoisie, the New Right is hardly the simple creation of a capitalist conspiracy. Rather, the New Right has developed largely as a spontaneous response of whites in the petit bourgeoisie and in the upper strata of the working class to the complex economic and social contradictions arising from the present crisis of U.S. imperialism. Analyzing the world through the lenses of "traditional American values," the New Right has built a following among these strata on the basis of appeals to racism, sexism, jingoistic patriotism, Christian morality, and anti-communism. Although the number of New Right activists with a self-consciously fascist ideology remains relatively small, the ideological outlook upon which the New

Right has built its base makes this movement a potential social base for fascism in the U.S., should the U.S. bourgeoisie determine at some point that only through fascist rule can its class interests be adequately defended.

While the organizations of the New Right are active on a wide range of issues, it is those New Right forces specializing in questions concerning women, sexuality, and the family that have scored the most dramatic successes in the past period. In its "pro-family" guise, the New Right has already scored a series of victories in its drive to reconsolidate the subordination of women, and all indications are that it is still gaining momentum and preparing for still greater victories.

First to fall victim to this reactionary assault was the ERA. After decades in which the issue of equal rights for women lay dormant, a renewed push for passage of the ERA was initiated by the more liberal (as opposed to radical) forces in the women's movement in the 1960s. The ERA was a safe enough issue to gain a very broad spectrum of support, including that of the leadership of both the Democratic and Republican Parties and the wives of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. Prospects for passage seemed quite good—if only because the bourgeoisie was not averse to a measure that would cause them little pain yet stand as a token of their commitment to women's rights.

In the last few years, however, the ERA has been voted down in state legislature after state legislature; it was withdrawn from the platform of the Republican Party, and now has only the bleakest prospect of passage. A relentless propaganda campaign by the New Right, largely personified by Phyllis Schlafly, succeeded in transforming the political climate around the amendment in a few short years. The ERA became a litmus test for true conservatism in an increasingly conservative political environment, and elected officials were subjected to the kind of political pressure that threatens careers and brings about "correct" votes on the issue at hand. Though not yet officially dead, the ERA is a mortally wounded victim of the New Right assault.

The ERA controversy, however, could not match the issue of abortion in rallying the moral fervor of the New Right. As soon as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on January 22, 1973, that abortion was the legal right of every woman, an anti-abortion "holy war" began. Originally launched mainly by the hierarchy of the Catholic church, the anti-abortion crusade has since become the central political issue around which the "pro-family" movement has coalesced. Adopting the rhetoric and terminology of the defenders of the helpless, the anti-abortion movement has been very effective in portraying the fight to make abortion illegal as a righteous cause. Arguing that they are "pro-life" and interested in the protection of the lives of "unborn Americans," the core of religiously motivated, misogynistic, and reactionary forces at the heart of this movement has largely succeeded in obscuring the fact that

the real issue at stake is a woman's right to control her own reproductive capacities.

Along with this ideological victory, the anti-abortion forces have scored a number of important political gains. Federal funding for abortions has, for all intents and purposes, been eliminated—an action with a calculated and devastating impact on poor and minority women. Military personnel and their dependents and Peace Corps workers are no longer able to use their medical benefits or U.S. government health care facilities for abortions. And in a majority of states, funding for abortion has all but dried up. The result is that a significant sector of the U.S. population is now denied access to safe and affordable abortions.

Not satisfied with their gains so far, the New Right-led crusade is moving on to bigger and better things; in particular, the HLA crusade. The HLA would amend the Constitution to declare a fetus a person and, in essence, make abortion a form of murder for both the mother and the person performing the abortion.

Opposition to the HLA has so far been inadequate to check its growing support. That it is not likely to become law at this time has more to do with the reluctance in general of many influential political forces to tinker with the Constitution than with the effective defense of abortion rights. Consequently, the pro-lifers have begun to focus on passage in Congress of a "Human Life Statute" (HLS) which would not involve changing the Constitution, but which would essentially bar federal courts from interfering with the right of states to outlaw abortion. The HLS, combined with a state-by-state offensive on vulnerable state legislators, could render abortion illegal around the country as surely as the HLA.

Undoubtedly, the issue of abortion has become a volatile one right at the center of U.S. politics. The combination of a substantial financial base, the ability to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people (most of them women) through the Catholic and fundamentalist church structures, and a massive propaganda effort have proved extremely effective in influencing the politics of abortion. Numerous politicians have been defeated for re-election mainly because of a pro-abortion stand, while others have waffled and backtracked on the issue to save their careers. In this atmosphere it is a good possibility that in a few short years the legal right to abortion could be lost altogether.

The Family Protection Act

While opposition to abortion has become the principal rallying cry of the New Right on the "woman question," the most complete expression of its overall political program for women is to be found in the so-called "Family Protection Act" (FPA). The FPA is specifically designed to give material support and moral sanction to one form of the family and to actively discriminate against or discourage others. The act is built on the presumption that the nuclear family in which the mother is principally a

homemaker and the father is breadwinner and chief authority is or should be the model "American family." All other forms of the family and modes of living are thought to be social aberrations.

Thus, the FPA would provide tax breaks when women stay in the home, withdraw funding for social services designed to protect women and children from arbitrary male authority, such as child abuse programs and programs for physically abused wives, withdraw funds from programs that advocate or discuss any other than the "traditional" roles for men and women, withdraw funds for suits involving discrimination against homosexuals, etc. The message of the FPA is quite explicit: parents should have close to absolute authority over their children; husbands should be able to exercise that same degree of authority over their wives; women's proper sphere of activity is the home. Any deviation from this social "norm" will be discouraged.

In short, the FPA is the concretization of the New Right's ideological vision of the role of women in U.S. society. It can gather together in its support the right-to-lifers, the religious zealots who would save America's children from secularism and "depravity," the specialists in the persecution and harassment of homosexuals, and those dedicated to the general salvation of America through "strong family values." The passage of this act, in whole or in part, would clearly be a setback of major proportions for women and for the working class movement.

B. The Changing Role of Women in U.S. Society

The emergence of such a broad-based mass movement in opposition to women's rights is no mere historical accident, the result of millions of Americans simultaneously discovering those passages in the Bible that delineate the "proper" role women should play in social life. Rather, this movement is one concrete and historically predictable response to a number of very real and dramatic changes in the role of women in U.S. society over the last thirty years.

At the root of these changes lie two essential factors: first, the qualitative increase in the degree to which women have become integrated into social production in the U.S. in the last three decades; second, developments in the forces of production—particularly scientific advances in methods of birth control and mass distribution of contraceptives—that have rendered obsolete any remaining necessity for women's reproductive capacity to act as a fetter on full participation in all aspects of social life. These two factors have become a widespread material force and have had a dramatic social impact on U.S. life. It is no exaggeration to say that they have provided the basis for the changing consciousness of women's role and the political expression of that consciousness in the modern women's movement. And the New Right backlash is responding to the social consequences of these objective developments. These developments frame the current political struggle

over women's rights and for that reason, deserve more detailed examination.

Women's Increased Integration into Social Production

Throughout U.S. history women, besides having the main or sole responsibility for homemaking functions to maintain the family unit, have played a key role in social production. Slave women worked alongside slave men in the fields and houses of their white owners; immigrant women sweated in the textile mills to produce the fortunes of New England capital; Asian and Latina women labored to enrich agricultural and industrial capital in the West and Southwest. Indeed, only a view of U.S. history with a profound class and racial bias could hold that the "traditional American family" kept the woman in the home cleaning house while the male partner functioned as breadwinner.

However, what is true is that until the last thirty years, women from certain strata of the population were largely outside social production. Women from the petit bourgeoisie and the most stable sectors of the working class were able to remain in the home as housewives because their husbands earned sufficient wages or income to sustain the entire family. Given the racial stratification in U.S. society—the disproportionate numbers of minorities in the lowest strata of the working class and their under-representation in the most protected sections of labor and the petit bourgeoisie—it has historically been mainly white and U.S.-born families that have been able to maintain a comfortable existence on the basis of a single wage. For the women in these households, the status of housewife has been a contradictory one. On the one hand, narrow restriction to the affairs of the home is one of the most stultifying expressions of women's oppression. On the other hand, the ability to remain in the home and avoid the direct embrace of capital has also been an indication of a level of stability, or for the petit bourgeoisie, class privilege, that is highly treasured. In recent decades, however, these women too have been pulled more and more rapidly into social production. Essentially, these women form a latent* reserve army of labor available to be drawn into capitalist production alongside the active labor force as capital's need for wage labor grows.

* It is important to distinguish this category of the reserve army of labor from the other strata of this crucial grouping within capitalism. Marx noted three forms of the industrial reserve which were differentiated by their role in capitalist production as well as their conditions of reproduction. The "floating" reserve consists of those who fall into unemployment normally through the functioning of the capitalist business cycle; members of the floating reserve are usually not unemployed for long and make up those who, in unemployment statistics, are actively looking for work. The "stagnant" reserve is composed of that sector of the labor force which is habitually unemployed and underemployed, but who
(cont.)

At the height of World War II, large numbers of this latent reserve army of labor were drawn into social production. In 1940, the percentage of women employed was 25.4%, having risen only 7% in the fifty years since 1890; by 1945, however, 36.1% of women were employed, a dramatic rise of over 10% in only five years.* This influx was temporary, however, and after the war large numbers of women were forced out of the labor force until in 1947 the percentage of employed women was reduced to 27.6%, essentially the level of 1940. (A further look at the statistics here also indicates the severe stratification within the class along racial lines; in 1948, 50.6% of minority women between the ages of 25 and 34 were employed, compared to 31.3% of white women in the same age group.)

Capitalism, however, is a system built on expansion—meaning essentially the expansion of the relation of exploitation between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Concretely, this means that the inherent motion of capital is to eat away at the latent reserve and draw more and more people into either the employed labor force or the floating and stagnant reserves. U.S. capital is no exception, and having largely exhausted the latent reserve of immigrant workers from Europe in the early twentieth century, the latent reserve of small land-holding whites by the time of World War II, and the latent reserve of the semi-proletarian Black population in the agricultural South during the war and immediately afterwards, capital has moved since the 1950s to make decisive inroads into its latent reserve of women.

The results have been quite dramatic. Since 1955, the U.S. employed workforce has grown by 31 million people, with three-fifths of the increase being women. Between 1950 and 1976, the labor force participation of married women increased 90%. The number of married

have no other mechanism than finding employment to survive; consequently, their conditions of life are significantly lower than those of the rest of the working class. (In the U.S. today, the stagnant reserve is largely made up of minorities.) The third category, the "latent" reserve, are those who can be recruited into the labor force from occupations where they are, in a political economic sense, superfluous. Historically, this has mainly referred to the agricultural population, but it is also applicable to housewives. In general, the tendency of capitalist development is to progressively and permanently erode the latent reserve. In exceptional periods, however, some number of these workers may be forced back into the economic position which they previously occupied. This happened to many housewives after World War II in the U.S.

* All statistics are from *American Women Workers in a Full Employment Economy, A Compendium of Papers Submitted to the Subcommittee on Economic Growth and Stabilization of the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977) pp. 26-39.

women, with children under 18, who worked for wages increased 2.5 times, and the number with children under 6 increased 3 times. Overall, by 1976, 47.3% of women were employed—a leap of 20% over the 1947 level—and the percentage is still growing rapidly.

Of course, this rapid change in the participation of women in the labor force has not at all meant that women have been integrated into social production in an equal basis with men. On the contrary, job segregation and discrimination have been integral features of this development, with women disproportionately filling many of the lowest-paying jobs or receiving less than equal pay for the same job as men. As of 1976, for example, one-third of working women were in clerical work and 99% of all secretaries were women. Women also made up 98% of all household workers and nurses and 77% of elementary school teachers. In 1977, 22% of full-time, permanently employed women earned less than \$5,000 annually, compared to 7% of men. The motion of capitalism is not to exclude women from social production, but to draw women into such production on a discriminatory basis. And in the last 30 years, this motion has undergone rapid acceleration, with women becoming integrated into social production at a pace without precedent in U.S. history.

Advances in the Forces of Production

Alongside this dramatic increase in women's integration into social production, during the last three decades the forces of production in U.S. capitalism have developed to the point where the level of technology and science makes the physical differences between men and women qualitatively irrelevant to their actual position in society's division of labor, aside from the naturally-determined division around pregnancy and childbirth itself. The conditions for this achievement have, of course, been steadily developing over decades. However, in the last 30 years in the U.S., certain key advances have occurred which have meant a qualitative leap in the ability of human beings to restrict the degree to which "biology determines destiny."

The first of these advances is the development of science and technology to the point where safe and 100% effective birth control is an immediate historical possibility. Of course, the relations of production under U.S. capitalism, those of private property and private profit, mean that such birth control is not actually available to most women in the U.S. Women's health is hardly a high priority concern of the large pharmaceutical companies which actually market such technology, and clearly each woman's class and racial position in U.S. capitalism affects her ability to obtain (or even be aware of) the latest and most effective birth control methods—including abortion. However, the technology to give women absolute control over when and if they bear children has become a reality; and in the U.S. today, birth control approximating this degree of control (even with its sex, class, and race-biased aspects) is utilized by

millions and operates as a profound material force shaping the social options of women throughout society.

Besides advances in the realm of birth control, the role of women has been profoundly affected by the general development of the forces of production in the U.S. to a level unheard of in human history. U.S. capitalism has attained a level of material development where the basis exists to socialize virtually all of the particular household responsibilities which have historically been the special province of women. Again, capitalist relations of production prevent this socialization from taking place in such a way as to actually liberate women; but here, too, the ability to have cooking, laundry, childcare, health care, etc. done quickly and conveniently outside the home functions as a widespread material force shaping family life and social relations.

The Social Impact of These Changes

The closely interrelated developments of technology and science and of the increased integration of women into social production have set the basis for the profound changes in the "fabric of American life" that have taken place over the past decade or two. Most conspicuous among these changes has been what is widely termed the "destruction of the family." We have already noted that the image of a family with a husband working, woman homemaking, and two healthy children is a class and racially biased one that distorts the reality of history. It is true, however, that in the last thirty years there have been dramatic changes in the norms of family and sexual life that have had a profound impact not only on the most oppressed sectors of the working class, but on the working class and petit bourgeoisie generally. Divorce has skyrocketed; the percentage of unmarried couples living together has risen sharply; homosexuality is increasingly open and has probably increased absolutely as this form of sexual preference has become a more acceptable option; the percentage of households made up of a woman and her children is on the increase, etc. Indeed, between the increasing dependence of the system as a whole on the integration of women into social production and the concomitant exercise by millions of women of new options not previously available to them, the "traditional American family" is indeed being undermined.

Closely related to this "destruction of the family" is the increased competition between men and women for jobs. Over the past 20 years this has generally meant the competition engendered as women enter fields previously reserved for men; but in the immediate period of social austerity and increased unemployment, it includes the competition between men and women for *any* job at a time when budgets are strained and job security is precious.

It is precisely these objective and far-reaching changes in the family,

sexual norms, and the relationship of women and men in social production that have altered the consciousness of millions concerning women's role in society and brought a variety of forces into active political struggle to shape the role of women in society. These objective developments have produced, on the one hand, the modern women's movement, a mass social phenomenon that has challenged discrimination against women and the many forms of sexist ideology that justified it. On the other hand, they have also brought forth a backlash from a variety of forces in society, mainly important sectors of the white petit bourgeoisie and more stable strata of the working class, who see their economic position and traditional value system threatened by the "new woman." This backlash is found among both women and men, but it is important to take note of the fact that there is a specific male backlash bound up within it, a social phenomenon which fundamentally reflects the defense by many men of the relative material advantages they hold over women because of the interweaving of sexist social relations with the basic structure of U.S. capitalism. And while this defense of male privileges overlaps considerably with the development of the New Right, it is hardly restricted to its ranks. The dramatic rise in sexist violence (rape and battered women, for example), the active resistance by men to women gaining access to certain jobs, or the many other less dramatic reflections of males defending their socially superior status in this sexist society, are phenomena which are visible throughout society and not just among the reactionary right-wingers.

However, these various ideological reactions and political movements are not historical accidents, but spontaneous reflections in social life of far-reaching changes in the role of women in U.S. society stemming directly from the underlying motion of U.S. capitalism. Swept along by the objective laws governing this motion, but acting to shape its concrete contours as well, is the U.S. bourgeoisie, which stands at the helm of the system overall. An examination of the bourgeoisie's decisive role in the politics of the woman question today is the subject of the next section of this article.

C. The Attack on Women Stemming from Monopoly Capital

While the New Right-led push to drive women back into the home is the cutting edge of the present assault on women's rights, the underlying economics and politics of this struggle are profoundly shaped by the class interests of U.S. monopoly capital itself.

Weakened by the erosion of its political power due to the gains of socialism and national liberation in the 1960s and '70s, and facing the intensifying economic contradictions characteristic of advanced monopoly capitalism, the U.S. bourgeoisie is presently engaged in an all-out counter-offensive against the international proletariat, including its U.S. detachment. The goals of this counter-offensive are to insure U.S.

control over its far-flung imperialist empire and to boost U.S. capital's profit margins through substantially increasing the rate of exploitation of the U.S. working class. In foreign policy, this offensive is expressed in the turn toward the use of military force and preparations for war. Within the U.S. it takes the form of a massive social austerity program imposed upon the U.S. working class, one whose hardest impact is felt by minority peoples. This overall class offensive frames the bourgeoisie's particular attack on women, accounting for both its intensity and the precise ways in which this attack is carried out.

In keeping with the long range trend of capitalist development analyzed in the previous section, the heart of the bourgeoisie's attack on women in this period is the particular way in which it is integrating more and more women into social production. The bourgeoisie's aim, essentially, is to establish a new standard where the average working class family must obtain two wages in order to sustain an average standard of living. Of course, in the more oppressed strata of the working class, particularly among minorities, it has long been the case that both the man and woman in the family unit had to earn a wage to keep the family above water. And since real wages for U.S. workers began falling in the late 1960s, this phenomenon has steadily become more and more widespread. With the launching of the present massive social austerity program, this trend has increased qualitatively. Its impact is severe on women in two-parent households because none of the special responsibilities for work in the home that they bear have been relieved. Obviously, it is even more severe on women who alone are responsible for a family, especially given the disparity in income between women and men. Monopoly capital has little sympathy with the plight of these women; the drive for a two-wage family standard is central to its present moves to qualitatively increase the rate of exploitation of the U.S. working class.

As it draws more and more women into the labor force and establishes the two-wage standard, the bourgeoisie is simultaneously moving to reinforce the sexist social relations which insure that women's participation in social production will not be on the basis of equality with men. The most conspicuous expression of this feature of the bourgeoisie's attack on women is the Reagan administration's attempt to gut affirmative action programs across the board. Capital is also stiffening its resistance to "equal pay for equal work" enforcement and to the rising demand for "equal pay for comparable work," a demand which would, if implemented, put a significant dent in sexist discrimination in the labor force. The point of these efforts of capital is to maintain women as a specially oppressed stratum of the labor force helping to keep the rate of exploitation of the U.S. working class as high as possible.

An additional feature of the attack on women stemming directly from monopoly capital's program is social service cuts, cuts that have a

particular negative impact on women. Many of the social programs that have faced the budget axe since Reagan took office are those with some specific benefit to women such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or federally subsidized daycare programs. And even cuts that appear on the surface to attack workers generally, such as slashes in education budgets or food stamps, have a sexist impact because of the particular burden women are forced to bear as the person principally responsible for maintaining the home. In general, as long as sexist social relations exist, which force women to assume special and additional responsibilities for caring for their families, any cutbacks in social services—which take up some of that burden—will have a decidedly sexist impact upon women. With the present all-around cuts in social services that characterize the Reagan administration, this sexist impact has assumed drastic proportions.

Finally, the bourgeoisie is attacking women through its general political and ideological effort to build mass support for its increasingly reactionary and repressive policies. The U.S. bourgeoisie is well aware that its present program of war and massive social austerity has an immediately negative economic impact on virtually the entire U.S. working class; it is determined to ensure that this impact will not result in the forging of a unified working class resistance. Consequently, it has carefully orchestrated its attack on the working class to maximize its ability to win sectors of the class to accept or support it, principally by concentrating its austerity program against minority peoples. This lays the basis for appeals to racist ideology and to jingoistic patriotism in an attempt to gain support for the bourgeoisie's program, largely among whites.* As an integral aspect of this effort to gain support, the bourgeoisie is fanning the flames of the many spontaneous and backward prejudices which exist in this country and which can contribute to developing a reactionary consciousness among the people. On the particular question of women's rights, this means fostering an ideological climate favorable to the New Right and the male backlash, broadening the movement to "keep women in their place."

Working Class and Minority Women Are Hardest Hit

In all these ways, the bourgeoisie is conducting a severe and immediate assault on the rights of women. However, it is crucial to note

* We have termed this part of the bourgeois offensive the attempt to forge a white consensus among the population, by which many U.S. workers are won to identify ideologically and function politically with the bourgeoisie along racial lines rather than identify with their class brothers and sisters in the non-white sector of the U.S. working class and with the international proletariat. For a more detailed analysis of the concept of the white consensus, see *A Communist*

(cont.)

that the impact of the assault stemming from monopoly capital itself is profoundly affected by the class and racial position of the women involved. Overwhelmingly, each of the sexist edges to the bourgeois offensive hits disproportionately on working class and especially minority women. It is working class and particularly racial minority women who bear the heaviest burden because of the austerity program that is eroding the earnings of the U.S. working class to the point where two wages are required to support a family above the poverty level. It is working class and particularly minority women who feel the most severe impact of social service cuts and continued sexist and racist discrimination in employment; these women also have the least protection when faced with the rise of sexist violence. The women hit hardest overall are those who are single heads of families; such single-parent families are found disproportionately in the working class and, again, particularly in its minority sectors. The point is that the offensive of monopoly capital is not at bottom a frontal assault on all women as women, but a class-directed attack designed to increase the rate of exploitation of the U.S. working class in order to boost the profit margins of monopoly capital and finance its massive military build-up.

Key features of this attack do overlap with the activities and goals of the New Right, but in contrast to the New Right, monopoly capital is not interested in a program to realize in life the ideological vision of women being restricted to the home. This leads to a contradiction between the forces who are respectively the most immediate and the most important enemies of women, a contradiction which we can and must exploit in order to advance the struggle for women's rights in the period ahead.

D. The Complex Relationship Between the New Right and The Bourgeoisie

The existence of a contradiction between the New Right and the bourgeoisie insofar as their respective programs for women are concerned is not an original observation of the communists; in fact, many communists overlook it. Nor is it a static, unchanging phenomenon: the bourgeoisie itself is well aware of these differences and is actively trying to bring the New Right into line behind a somewhat "more reasonable" program for the oppression of women in this period. At the same time, the New Right is exerting every effort to win the bourgeoisie to as many aspects of its program as possible. Within this context, the common commitment of both these forces to the subordination of women is primary over their differences; nevertheless, the differences that do exist are of no minor significance and actually affect the operation of these politics in U.S. life.

Proposal for a United Front Against War and Racism, Line of March, #5, and Racism—the Cutting Edge of the Bourgeois Offensive, Line of March, #8.

A useful example of this contradiction at work was the recent skirmish between the New Right and the bourgeoisie in relation to the confirmation hearings on Sandra O'Connor's nomination as Supreme Court Justice. Here we had the interesting spectacle of Barry Goldwater, the old war horse of the ultra-conservatives, chastizing the New Right for their intransigence in attempting to make O'Connor's stand on abortion the sole question on which her confirmation should turn. Goldwater's speech on this issue aptly captured the differences that presently exist between the responsible elected servants of the bourgeoisie and the mass-based New Right on this question. First he stated, "I don't get all jazzed up about busing. And I don't get too excited about abortion. Nor do I get too exercised over ERA." (*Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 1981) If one was left wondering what Goldwater does get jazzed up, excited and exercised about, he was ready with an answer. Goldwater's main complaint, it seems, is that the New Right is "diverting us away from the vital issues that our government needs to address. Far too much of the time of members of Congress and officials in the Executive Branch is used up dealing with special-interest groups on issues like abortion, school busing, ERA, prayer in the schools and pornography. While these are important moral issues, they are secondary right now to our national security and economic survival." (*New York Times*, September 15, 1981) There are two interrelated themes here worth noting. In the first place, this highly practical and class conscious representative of the U.S. ruling class has identified clearly the main concerns of the bourgeoisie in this period: building up the U.S. military for active counter-revolution throughout the world ("national security"), and boosting corporate profits ("economic survival"). In the second place, he has emphasized that other questions, whatever their moral or ideological value, cannot be allowed to divert the main attention of the bourgeois state from its principal class concerns.

Based on these political foundations, Goldwater sends his friendly message to the New Right: the bourgeoisie will tolerate and even assist it in becoming a powerful political force and will even express some important sympathy with its widely broadcast system of "American values." But to go too far with ideological zealotry (in this case, to make an absolute principle of forcing women into the home) means to get a cold shoulder from the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie is no friend of women's liberation, but it is concerned that women's special oppression conforms to the class interests of capital and not to the ideological principles of religious fundamentalists or misogynist reactionaries.* So the New Right should get back in line and subordinate its "moral values" to the higher national interest.

* There are, of course, other issues as well in the differences between the bourgeoisie and the New Right. Despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, the

(cont.)

Overall, the O'Connor incident indicates that the bourgeoisie clearly holds the upper hand in its political tug-of-war with the New Right. By nominating O'Connor in the first place, Reagan sent a clear signal to the New Right that monopoly capital—not the terrorized petit bourgeoisie—was calling the political shots in this administration. Wisely, the New Right beat a strategic retreat, satisfying itself that it was able to use the nomination in order to establish the legitimacy of making views on abortion a proper topic for consideration in the selection of public officials. The outcome was quite satisfactory from the bourgeoisie's point of view. O'Connor was easily confirmed, another reliable servant of capital was installed on the Supreme Court bench, and Ronald Reagan was able to parade as a pioneer in the movement for women's equality. At the same time, the New Right was effectively reminded of its proper political status in the bourgeoisie's scheme of things.

But this whole episode is hardly satisfactory from the point of view of the women's movement and the working class. In fact, it should be quite sobering. For what was clearly missing from this whole political affair was any challenge to O'Connor from the left, despite the fact that her views are clearly and thoroughly consistent with the bourgeois offensive now impacting the U.S. working class. In particular, what was missing was the kind of massive women's movement that could have called attention to the irony that the first woman ever nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court felt obligated to loudly proclaim her personal opposition to abortion in her confirmation hearings, and to draw out the appropriate political lesson: namely, that the presence of this woman on the nation's highest court is not at all a step toward women's liberation.

It is precisely the task of building such a massive women's movement that presently confronts the communists as we attempt to fulfill our responsibilities to lead the struggle against the oppression of women.

bourgeoisie does not at all favor the New Right's apparent willingness to undermine the separation of powers doctrine of the Constitution which would force a confrontation between the legislative and judicial branches. Nor does it favor granting additional power to the various states at the expense of the federal government. Likewise, the bourgeoisie is fully aware of the dangers involved if the separation of church and state is undermined and religious prejudices actually become a dominant force in setting public policy. Concerns such as these underlie the move of conservative political representatives of the bourgeoisie such as Goldwater to openly chastise the New Right in recent months. However, our main focus in this article is on the particular question of women's oppression and not the general relationship between the New Right and the bourgeoisie; thus our main attention is directed at the particular difference that exists between the New Right and the bourgeoisie concerning the "proper" role women should play in U.S. life in this period.

II. The Defense of Women's Rights

A. The Present Disorientation of the Women's Movement

The attack on women's rights is mounting daily, and it is no exaggeration to state that it threatens to turn the clock back half a century on the status of women in the U.S. Immense devastation will be inflicted on the lives of millions of women if even one or two measures in the New Right's anti-woman arsenal become the law of the land. The most immediate danger is that even the basic legal right to abortion—already a right which has been put beyond the power of millions of poor and minority women to exercise due to restrictions placed on government expenditures—will be eliminated. Just over the horizon lie other dangers, perhaps not as dramatic as the spectre of coat-hangers and back-alley abortions, but with no less impact on women's lives.

These dangers threaten women from virtually all social classes in the U.S. The loss of the legal right to abortion, for example, would work a tremendous hardship on all but the wealthiest of women. And there would be a profound negative impact on the dignity and status of all women should the ideological vision of women promoted by the New Right become the social norm. Precisely because of this sweeping, anti-woman character of the New Right-led attack, the possibility exists to mobilize a broad, cross-class front of women to conduct the struggle for women's rights.

In fact, such a broad cross-class movement already exists. The women's movement of the 1960s and '70s was itself a mass, cross-class phenomenon, and the forces moving into action today to combat the New Right (many of whom are veterans of the struggles of earlier years) continue in that tradition. Essentially, the objective interest women from different classes have in defending basic democratic rights for women is spontaneously reflected in the cross-class women's movement of today.

Despite the immediate danger posed by the right wing assault which should act as a clarion call to revitalize this potentially massive and powerful social movement and energize all forces within it, the women's movement today remains profoundly disoriented and has been unable to mount an effective challenge to the reactionary offensive. While the New Right juggernaut rolls along terrorizing faint-hearted bourgeois politicians with petition campaigns, demonstrations, and lobbying efforts, the progressive women's movement has been able to take only the most faltering steps to mobilize resistance to it.

In part, the disorientation of the women's movement today is due to the general ebb in mass progressive struggle that characterized the 1970s. Like other progressive social movements, the women's movement has suffered from the decline in political activism of recent years; where once thousands of new women stepped forward every month to

devote themselves to the struggle for women's rights, today the activist energy is significantly less widespread. The sharpest reflection of this is that, in all too many cases, the progressive women's movement cannot match the legions of the New Right in mass mobilizing capacity for demonstrations, lobbying campaigns, or conferences.

Liberal Reformist Line Has Dominated

But the reason for the inadequate response of the women's movement is not lack of energy or numbers. Even in this period of relative ebb compared to the late 1960s, there are thousands of women taking up the fight, and thousands more whose energies are waiting to be tapped to make a contribution. Furthermore, every public opinion survey demonstrates unequivocally that the overwhelming majority of women continue to support such goals as unrestricted abortion rights and the ERA. The underlying reason for the disarray in the women's movement is to be found in the fact that the movement is dominated by a political line incapable of galvanizing the energies of millions of women and of guiding the complex and protracted struggle to defeat the New Right and then take the offensive in the struggle for women's rights.

The political line that presently dominates the women's movement—and in fact has done so since the inception of the modern women's movement in the 1960s—is a reformist line which reflects the class interests of the liberal bourgeoisie and the petit bourgeoisie. This line accepts the underlying property relations of capitalism—and their social consequences—as a given, and views women's oppression as a form of discrimination that can be resolved step-by-step within capitalism through a series of struggles for formal and legal equality. Those struggles are certainly of crucial importance for all women, and to the extent that the women's movement, led by this reformist line, has pushed those struggles forward, it has functioned as a progressive force. However, precisely because it is the underlying relations of capitalism that actually reproduce women's oppression (as well as class exploitation) in this era, this line is, at best, a program for women of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie to join their male counterparts as equal partners in the exercise of class privilege, the reproduction of class exploitation, and inescapably, the maintenance of the special oppression of the masses of women.

It is this reformist line that objectively dominates the largest and best organized forces in the women's movement today, notably the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). It is also the line which shapes the editorial policy of the "official" publication of the modern women's movement, *Ms.* magazine. At bottom, this perspective accounts for both the strengths and weaknesses of these forces; it propels them forward to take up, at times in a militant way, certain struggles for women's rights; but it also fits them

with class and racial blinders making it difficult if not impossible for them to speak effectively to the pressing concerns of working class and minority women and to tap their energy for the struggle for women's rights. Not surprisingly, these reformist forces find their political home in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and see their allies in the most conservative sectors of the labor and civil rights movements. (Symbolizing this alliance was the promotion of the "big three" at the AFL-CIO-initiated Solidarity Day March last September 19: Lane Kirkland, hawkish and diehard anticommunist president of the AFL-CIO; Benjamin Hooks, openly pro-capitalist and anti-militant head of the NAACP; and Eleanor Smeal, steadfastly liberal president of NOW, walked arm in arm at the front of the march.)

Undoubtedly, these liberal forces have an important role to play in the broad cross-class front which must be forged today to defeat the New Right. At present they are in fact the most active force in the field, operating not only through the already-mentioned standing organizations, but also through the recently formed National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) which has taken the lead in propagandizing against the New Right's attempt to outlaw abortion. However, these forces cannot be relied upon to lead the long run struggle for women's liberation, or even to anchor effectively the broad cross-class front taking shape in response to the New Right. Restricted by their underlying commitment to the present class relations in the country, these forces inevitably neglect the issues which must be addressed and the methods of struggle that must be used if the masses of women are to be mobilized for action. While building up a large war chest to fight for the ERA or against the HLA, these forces pay far less attention to stopping the Hyde Amendment or government cutbacks in welfare spending or food stamps, issues vital to poor and particularly minority women. While militant on occasion, these forces retain an underlying fear of being swept away if the masses of women actually rise up; therefore they consistently channel the energies of the movement into narrow legislative activity through the Democratic Party. It is this perspective that has limited the ability of the women's movement to realize its full potential in this period when realizing that potential is so necessary. Though the forces that hold this reformist line are our allies in battles with the New Right, their leadership of the women's movement as a whole must be challenged and ultimately broken, or the women's movement will flounder indefinitely and suffer defeat after defeat.

Separatists Fail the Larger Movement

Frustration with the reformist perspective has in fact been widespread among the more left and activist elements in the women's movement for the last decade. However, no positive alternative has emerged as a nationwide force. In the absence of a serious political strategy, many

forces have turned to building the alternative institutions of the "women's community," and become influenced by separatist views. During the 1970s, a period of ebb in mass political struggle, conditions were favorable for this tendency to flourish, and today it still holds sway among many women who are militantly committed to upholding the dignity and rights of women.

Although the separatist position was spurred forward by those immediate conditions, the underlying painful reality of life in a sexist world has set the basic groundwork for this line to emerge and gain influence. Sexism is indeed a material and ideological reality that pervades all strata of society, and this has led some to conclude that the only road to women's liberation is the building of a separate, feminist reality free from the contamination of male chauvinism. While not all energy that goes into alternative institution building is based on full unity with this long range strategy, it is all too prevalent that the institutions of the "women's community" become ends in themselves rather than a means to gather forces for a concentrated political assault on the capitalist relations responsible for the maintenance of women's oppression in the U.S. The illusory dream of creating an oppression-free environment by absenting women from the presence of men turns out in reality to mean constructing a comfortable haven for a small number of women while failing to bring the vast majority one whit closer to liberation. While lacking the glaring class bias of the reformist elements, and justifying itself on the basis of much more radical rhetoric concerning the oppression of women, this line, too, is at base an abandonment of the struggle for the liberation of women.

That this line leads in fact to such an abandonment is illustrated by the inability of forces adhering to it to play a significant role in the present life-and-death struggle with the New Right, on the abortion issue in particular. While the New Right is furiously active in the mass political struggle, and even the reformist elements of the liberal women's movement have entered the political fray, those committed to alternative institution-building and separatism are trapped in self-contained communities and unable to play an effective role in the struggle as it is actually unfolding. The irony of this is that all the energy and time that has gone into women's clinics for abortion, for example, will be virtually pointless if abortion is actually outlawed.

Of course, these forces too will play a role in the broad front that must be built against the New Right. However, like the line of liberal reformism, the line projecting an alternative women's community as the salvation of women is incapable of leading that front as a whole. For this task, as well as the task of forging a women's movement that can take the offensive when the New Right offensive is turned back, a line is required that centers on the oppression of women of the working class, and targets

as its goal galvanizing the mass of such women into struggle to overcome women's oppression as well as the class relations of capitalism that serve as the basis for its constant regeneration.

B. Setting the Women's Movement on Course

The present disorientation in the women's movement will not be overcome unless working class politics become dominant within it.

This is true, first of all, for quantitative reasons: The majority of U.S. women are part of the working class, and unless the women's movement speaks to most pressing needs of working class women and places them at the center of its political life, it will not have sufficient stability and strength to conduct the difficult battles that lie ahead.

More fundamental than the question of numbers, however, is the fact that the condition of women of the working class is the most concentrated expression of women's oppression. The lives of working class women are shaped by the deadly intersection of women's oppression and class exploitation, a combination that inevitably pushes the struggle for women's liberation beyond formal equality and legal rights to confront the underlying social relations that lie at the heart of women's oppression. A women's movement that shies away from this confrontation is inherently unstable politically, precisely because it avoids the crux of the issue which is the very basis for the movement's existence.

The need to base the women's movement on working class politics, then, is not merely a question of the ideological preference of the communists; at stake in this question is whether the movement grows or declines, whether it consistently advances the struggle for women's liberation or vacillates when the rights of the masses of women are under attack. In the period immediately ahead, the ability of working class politics to gain influence within the women's movement will be a decisive factor in determining whether the hard-won gains of the last 20 years are maintained or wiped out.

For these reasons, it has become an urgent necessity for the most class conscious forces to draw together and begin to bring a working class line into active contention for leadership in the women's movement. The first step, of course, is to gain some common understanding of the actual content of such a working class line. While a thorough theoretical and political presentation of such a line must await another time,* we feel the following are the basic building blocks upon which an all-sided working class line for the struggle against women's oppression in the present period must be based.

* A two-part article presenting an overall theoretical framework analyzing the oppression of women is planned for issues #11 and #12 of *Line of March*. This series will be based on the theoretical work of the Line of March Women's Commission conducted over the past year on the nature of the oppression of women.

Women's Oppression and Capitalism

There are two basic propositions that frame a working class line on women's oppression. The first is that women's oppression is a distinct social relationship whose central dynamic is the subordination of women in nearly all aspects of social life. The relation of male supremacy/female subordination impacts women across class lines; it has myriad forms and manifestations unique to women's oppression and is qualitatively distinct from other forms of oppression and exploitation, such as racism or class exploitation. As a pervasive and long-standing social relation, women's oppression has both a highly developed material base—which accounts for its continual and spontaneous reproduction—as well as ideological constructs specific to it. Spontaneously arising from this social relation is a political movement of *women as women* directed at combatting and overcoming male supremacy.

It is precisely this first proposition and its political consequences that the communist movement has inadequately addressed in the past, generally tending to view any movement of women as women (rather than as workers) as somehow tainted or illegitimate. This distortion of Marxism is ultimately responsible for the historic and current isolation of communists from the mass women's movement.

This negative legacy must be broken with; a working class line on women's oppression must, first of all, grasp the specific nature of this form of oppression and the legitimacy of the political movement which it spontaneously generates.

However, if we go no further than the assertion of the particularity of women's oppression, then we have stopped at the level of the spontaneous understanding of the women's movement itself. Thus, the second basic proposition is also fundamental to a working class line on women's oppression. That proposition is that women's oppression is decisively shaped and framed by the capitalist system of class exploitation. Though women's oppression predates capitalism, it is the underlying relations of capitalism, and particularly the basic contradiction between its two main antagonistic classes, that determine the main form and content of women's oppression. The specific ways in which women are denied full and equal participation in social production are fundamentally shaped by the needs of capitalist development. In the U.S. today, for example, this means that women who are part of the active labor force are relegated to sex-segregated occupations; competition within the working class is weighted along sex lines, and, as a consequence, women's earnings come to 59 cents on the dollar as compared to that of men. From this single instance it is clear that, while competition within the working class is mediated through the relation of male supremacy, the whole is framed by capitalist relations. In other words, the contradiction defining the process as a whole is a social system in which competition within the

working class is the means by which the bourgeoisie is able to intensify its exploitation of the entire working class. The discriminatory integration of women into capitalist social production is a concretization of that fundamental contradiction which seizes upon and makes use of the relations of inequality between men and women that both predate capitalism and have characterized all of capitalist social and economic development.

Similarly, while family relations which are oppressive to women certainly have their origins long before the advent of capital, it is the class relations of advanced capitalist society that give the family the specific shape it assumes in the U.S. today. The size, location, and character of the family are not determined principally by the relations between individual men and women. Rather, the choices that individuals make about such matters are framed and limited by the social context of capitalist development. The pressures of extensive proletarianization, industrialization, and urbanization are the general features of advanced capitalism that make the family what it is today. Further, women's particular role in the family has been profoundly impacted by such phenomena as the extraordinarily high level of commodification of the means of subsistence in U.S. society and the previously mentioned pull by capital on the latent reserve. Women's oppression and subordination within the family is subject to contradictory pressures. On the one hand, the discrimination against women in social production and the pervasiveness of male chauvinist ideology directly reinforce relations of inequality in the home. On the other hand, the increasing integration of women into social production together with advances in the science and technology of reproductive control have begun to provide the objective basis to break the dependency of women on men and their subordination to them in family relations.

Thus, in all its various aspects, women's oppression is inextricably interwoven with and shaped by capitalist class relations. This understanding has major consequences for how the political struggle against women's oppression is viewed. In essence, the struggle against women's oppression must ultimately confront the exploitative class relations that sustain this form of oppression. From this perspective, the struggle against women's oppression can be understood as an anti-capitalist, revolutionary struggle whose specific goal—the defeat of male supremacy—cannot be achieved short of the defeat of capitalism itself. This is not to say that male supremacy will die out of its own accord once class exploitation is overcome. It will not. But male supremacy and women's oppression cannot be qualitatively smashed unless the working class is able to transform society in its own interests.

At bottom, the struggle against women's oppression is one crucial front in the overall revolutionary struggle against capitalism. This truth must be grasped by both the women's movement and the working class

movement as a whole if the struggle against women's oppression and capitalism itself is to be successfully waged.

The Class Struggle Today

Precisely because of the above point, the day-to-day struggle against women's oppression must be guided by a perspective that illuminates the overall contours of the class struggle. And this illumination cannot be left at a level of abstraction which emphasizes the general link between women's oppression and capitalism and the general precept that the working class must unite and overthrow the bourgeoisie. Rather, it must be concretized in a political line that analyzes the actualities of the class struggle in each particular period.

In our view, the concept of building a United Front Against War and Racism provides such an advanced line for the class struggle in the U.S. today.*

At the heart of this line rests the proposition that U.S. imperialism is presently going on the offensive against the international proletariat in order to maintain its class rule in the face of a shrinking empire and deepening economic crisis. The pillars of this offensive lie, first, in a foreign policy of a stepped-up intervention and preparations for war and, second, in the imposition of a massive racially-orchestrated social austerity program on the U.S. working class.

The capacity of the bourgeoisie to get away with such a brutal and blatant assault on two fronts is closely tied to its ability to win important sectors of the U.S. working class to support or at least accept the basic outlines of the bourgeoisie's program. The bourgeoisie hopes to win such support from large numbers of white workers by concentrating the main impact of its attack upon workers and oppressed peoples abroad and minorities at home, and simultaneously stepping up its ideological appeal to "patriotic" and racist sentiments in the country. As an integral part of this attempt to build support, the bourgeoisie is encouraging the growth of forces on the political right, particularly those that promise to deliver to the bourgeoisie a social base within the working class itself for their anti-working class offensive.

Under these circumstances, the appropriate strategy for the working class is to forge a broad united front which brings together as many of the diverse political elements and social strata in the class as possible, a front that must have as the core of its identity the struggle against war and racism.

Clearly, this perspective concerning the overall contours of the class struggle today is not a substitute for a particular analysis of the distinct

* See, *A Communist Proposal for a United Front Against War and Racism, Line of March, #5*. Also, *The U.S. Prepares for War—Against Whom? Line of March, #7*, and *Racism—the Cutting Edge of the Bourgeois Offensive, Line of March, #8*.

motion of the struggle against women's oppression in this period (if it were, there would have been no reason to develop the specific analysis presented in this commentary). However, it does place this motion in the context of the broader class struggle as it is unfolding today, and thus provides the crucial foundation for a working class strategy for the struggle against women's oppression. And as a result of fulfilling this purpose, the United Front Against War and Racism line yields a number of important insights concerning the particular dynamics involved in building the women's movement today.

In the first place, the strategic conception of building a United Front Against War and Racism as the key task before the working class in the present period illuminates the reasons why this is a defensive period in the struggle for women's equality and why forces on the right wing of the political spectrum now have the initiative in the country. Such a perspective provides the basis for activists in the women's movement to analyze the immense difficulties of the moment objectively, and to avoid the type of fatalistic analysis that attributes the present problems to some natural or mystical obstacles to advancing the struggle. The prevalence of such views has demoralized many women who have worked long and hard for women's liberation, taking them out of the struggle just at the difficult moment when they are most needed.

Second, by spotlighting those two questions—war and racism—which are the cutting edge of the class question in this period,* the United Front

* It is precisely the fact that the imperialists' drive toward war and the reinforcement of racism are the two cutting edge questions of the class struggle today that has led to the formulation of a working class strategy as building a United Front Against War and Racism rather than a formulation of a United Front Against War, Racism, and Sexism. To explore in detail the reasons why war and racism are indeed the cutting edges of the class struggle in a way that sexism is not is beyond the scope of this article; it is an important discussion in itself which we hope to take up in a future exchange in *Line of March*. However, the basic theoretical reason why this is the case is implicit throughout this commentary, framing its entire analysis of women's oppression today and the struggle against it, so we will draw it out briefly here.

The starting point in determining a revolutionary strategy must be the examination of the *class* contradictions at work—what is the precise manner in which each nation's proletariat and the proletariat internationally confront the bourgeoisie. When such a standpoint is applied to the U.S. revolution, it leads inexorably to the following conclusions:

First, because of its role as the headquarters of world imperialism, the U.S. bourgeoisie when conducting any *class* offensive inevitably attacks the proletariat internationally. This is reflected today in the U.S. bourgeoisie's turn toward war against the forces of national liberation and socialism.

Internal to the U.S., because minority peoples are overwhelmingly concentrated in the lowest strata of the U.S. proletariat, any class offensive by the bourgeoisie has a concentrated racist impact structurally built into it as a central feature.

(cont.)

Against War and Racism line calls attention to the weaknesses of the present women's movement, both in terms of its composition and in the issues which it takes up, and indicates the path to overcome them. In particular, it highlights the fact that a women's movement which does not place the objective concerns of minority women at the heart of its program and in which minority women do not function at all levels of its base and leadership is a movement which is bound to be isolated precisely from those who are the principal object of women's oppression. To avoid such a fatal isolation, this line directs the women's movement toward making central to its politics such issues as the defense of funding for abortion (not just its legality), opposition to forced sterilization, resistance to cutbacks in social services or affirmative action, organizing of the masses of unorganized women workers, welfare rights, etc.

Finally, by illuminating the cutting edges of the class struggle in this period, this line also points the women's movement in the direction of its most reliable allies. It is exactly those forces spontaneously swinging into motion around the related question of war and racism that inevitably

Women, however, are not distributed across the class spectrum in U.S. society in such a manner as to structure sexism as a similarly central pillar into any class offensive by the bourgeoisie. Thus, while minorities make up an overwhelming percentage of the lowest layers of the U.S. proletariat, a significant but much smaller percentage of the upper layers of the class, a tiny fraction of the petit bourgeoisie, and a virtually non-existent proportion of the bourgeoisie itself, women make up roughly 50% of each class and class stratum in the U.S. population. (This figure must be modified by the fact that an increasing number of women head households and these households are disproportionately in the working class and, increasingly, in its lower strata. However, this modification does not qualitatively alter the main point made here.) Consequently, while a bourgeois offensive against the working class, because of society's sexist relations, does have a particular impact upon women, it does not frontally attack women as a group in the same manner that a class attack on the working class frontally attacks minorities as a group. In addition, minorities also face a form of social segregation that largely isolates them as a group physically and geographically from the remainder of society. This reality reflects, explains, and reinforces the all-pervasiveness of the color line in American life, as well as the degree to which minorities as a group can potentially be singled out.

The overall point is that the class differentiation among women makes sexism a relation that mainly takes the form of special oppression *within* a particular class, rather than (as racism) determining one's class position altogether. As a result, the oppression of women does not lie at the cutting edge of the class contradictions in society. This point is crucial to understanding why the bourgeoisie's offensive against the working class impacts women in the particular way it does, why there is so much importance to the concept of forging the women's movement on a working class basis, and why the formulation of a United Front Against War and Racism accurately provides the guidance to do so. In fact, this approach is crucial if an effective road to the liberation of the masses of women is to be charted.

will be drawn into the sharpest confrontation with that force—monopoly capital—which is ultimately the decisive enemy of women's liberation. These forces, then, have the potential to embrace the fight for women's rights and stay with it through the twists and turns of the class struggle; while those who vacillate on the key issues of war and racism are likely to fall into the political arms of the bourgeoisie somewhere down the road. In other words, this line provides the key to drawing the class line against the strategic enemy most firmly and to determining which forces will compromise and which will stand firm as the battlelines get drawn ever more sharply.

Concededly, what we have said thus far is not yet a fully developed, all-sided line on women's oppression and a political strategy to achieve women's liberation. But the combination of a basic theoretical analysis of women's oppression as a distinct social relation framed overall by capitalism, the United Front Against War and Racism strategy for the working class struggle in this particular period, and the concrete analysis of the present attacks on women presented in this article do provide, in our view, the basic building blocks of a line capable of revitalizing the women's movement, both in defense of women's rights and as a key front in opposition to the bourgeois offensive overall.

C. Overcoming the Disarray in the Communist Ranks

Reforging the women's movement on the basis of a working class line is completely dependent on the communists playing the decisive role in the process.

Undoubtedly, there are many non-communist women who, because of their class position and/or their frustration with the ineffectiveness of the reformist line, spontaneously gravitate toward a revolutionary and anti-capitalist approach to the struggle for women's liberation. However, these forces cannot develop a scientific line to crystallize their spontaneous anti-capitalist sentiments, or cohere into an effective leading core to direct the reorientation of the women's movement on their own. For these tasks, the leadership of Marxist-Leninists is required.

Unfortunately, today such leadership is largely absent. If the extreme danger of the present assault on women brings into sharp relief the disorientation presently afflicting the women's movement, it spotlights even more vividly the inadequacies of the communist movement in taking up its responsibilities in the fight against women's oppression. The communist movement overall, and the emerging Marxist-Leninist trend in particular, has distinguished itself more by its shortcomings in this arena than by its strengths. The urgent needs of the class struggle today demand that Marxist-Leninists reverse this situation and take immediate and decisive steps to intervene in an effective manner in the women's movement.

Accomplishing this task will require that U.S. Marxist-Leninists frankly confront the negative aspects of our historical legacy and relative theoretical and political impoverishment concerning the "woman question." Undoubtedly, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) in its heyday did do a great deal of work among women and did do a certain amount of theoretical work analyzing women's oppression. However, by and large the communists' practical work involved giving special attention to organizing women in defense of the conditions of life of the working class as a whole or in relation to social and political questions such as the fight for peace or the battle against racism. At its most broad-minded, the Communist Party USA emphasized organizing in certain industries where large numbers of women worked, organizing them mainly as workers and secondarily addressing certain particular questions of women's oppression. Only rarely, if at all, did earlier generations of communists make a major effort to organize or propagandize around questions that affect *women as women*—reproductive rights, childcare, rape, the economic and social trials of single-parenting, the democratic rights of lesbians, etc.—or to analyze the special oppression of women as a distinct social relation not reducible to a quantitative extension of or minor variation upon capitalist exploitation.

Such shortcomings must, of course, be placed in historical perspective. A mass spontaneous movement of women as women was not a salient feature of the class struggle of the 1930s and '40s, and the conditions which gave rise to such a movement 30 years later had not yet fully ripened. And for all its shortcomings, the CPUSA played an overall positive role in its earlier days in the struggles to better women's lives.

However, what may have been understandable in the 1930s was inexcusable in the 1960s and '70s. By the 1960s, dramatic changes had taken place in women's role in U.S. society, and a mass spontaneous women's movement was a vital part of the nation's political life. Yet U.S. communists, under the sway of the CPUSA's revisionist orientation and of the infantile leftism of the U.S. variety of Maoism, simply continued in the old footsteps of objectively liquidating the oppression of women as a special, particular, and crucial question of the class struggle. If anything, the CPUSA and the New Communist Movement of the 1960s were *more* backward than the old party had been; the revisionists and Maoists alike displayed considerable hostility toward the women's movement, exaggerated its weaknesses and underestimated its revolutionary potential, actively promoted many of the worst anti-lesbian slanders and prejudices, and generally lost their political bearings so badly that a number of organizations, both the CPUSA and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) among them, actually took stands against the ERA!

Unfortunately, the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist trend, which emerged from the wreckage of Maoism in the mid-1970s, has not yet distinguished itself through any decisive break with this backward

tradition. While the trend generally has avoided the most backward lines and practices of its predecessors, the trend has as yet developed little in the way of advanced theory or practice to contribute to the struggle for women's liberation.

Breaking with Liquidationism

The first step in correcting this unacceptable situation is to break decisively with the tradition of aggravated neglect of the theoretical questions and practical work related to the struggle against women's oppression, in a word, to break decisively with liquidationism. Such liquidationism is rooted in a crude economism that understands class struggle to consist only of the economic struggle between the capitalist and the worker. All other forms of struggle against oppression and exploitation are viewed as entirely ancillary and deserving of communist attention only insofar as they affect the economic struggle, understood in its most concrete sense as the fight over wages and working conditions.

Once this economist orientation is adopted, it is not surprising that the communists give attention only to organizing women in their capacity as workers, as reliable and important supporters of "their" menfolk in the midst of economic battles, or at best, as a particular group to be drawn into anti-racist organizing, anti-war work, etc. This dominant perspective would prevent the study of women's oppression from ever appearing near the top of the theoretical agenda, since it is seen to be of little significance to the class struggle.

Objectively liquidationism, buttressed by crude economism, has been the dominant current both in our trend and in the communist movement as a whole in the U.S. for at least the past two decades.

In the absence of an advanced Marxist-Leninist analysis of women's oppression or an active and constructive communist presence in the mass women's movement, the "left" pole in this arena of class struggle has been staked out by socialist-feminism. Theoretically, socialist-feminism is put forward as the most advanced way to bring historical and dialectical materialism to bear upon the question of women's oppression. Practically, socialist-feminist politics are offered as the road to building an anti-capitalist women's movement. The influence of socialist-feminism is widespread among activists in the women's movement; and many of its ideas, presented through the prolific outpourings of the Marxist academy, have found a foothold within the communist movement itself.

Socialist-feminism as we know it today originated as a relatively spontaneous gravitation toward Marxist theory and revolutionary politics among activists in the women's movement in the 1960s. Initially its effect was a positive one. In a period when the women's movement was dominated by an overtly reformist, bourgeois feminism, when the line most widely projected as a militant alternative was radical separatism,

and when the communists were either irrelevant or hostile to the movement, socialist-feminism emphasized the importance of studying Marxism and targetting the capitalist system as a key source of women's oppression. The result was a wave of interest and support for socialist-feminism among many activists in the women's movement and among many women attempting to develop a serious theoretical understanding of the condition of women.

However, the promise socialist-feminism offered of building a revolutionary women's movement failed to materialize. In particular, socialist-feminist politics utterly failed to alter the profound class and racial biases of the women's movement and direct that movement toward building a base among working class and, in particular, among minority women. On the contrary, socialist-feminism actually became one of the main *justifications* for the overwhelmingly white character of the women's movement through its advocacy of the notion that the revolutionary struggle should be conducted by a collection of autonomous movements of oppressed groups and that the correct place for minority women is in the autonomous minority movements. Those sectors of the women's movement where socialist-feminism is dominant, in fact, actually have a weaker class base (and also are less politically effective in taking up the key mass questions of the day) than those led by the more right forces in the women's movement.

This profound political failure is a direct result of fundamental flaws in the theoretical propositions which make up the core of socialist-feminist ideology.* Though socialist-feminism initially began as an attempt to bring dialectical and historical materialism to bear on the oppression of women, and claims to be the most advanced scientific view of the nature of women's oppression, its actual Marxist moorings are quite weak. Fundamentally, social-feminism bases itself upon a view of contemporary society as one made up of a collection of various oppressed and oppressor groups rather than a society fundamentally shaped by *class* contradictions. While claiming it incorporates the contradiction between the working class and capitalist class as (the socialist) half of its analysis, it ends up denying the fundamental role this contradiction plays in shaping women's oppression and the struggle for women's liberation. This key theoretical error is ultimately responsible for socialist-feminism's eclecticism (few socialist-feminists can agree on what precisely this ideology consists of and to what political strategy it gives rise) as well as its political failure to build a working class women's movement.

At bottom, socialist-feminism represents the politics of social democ-

* Clearly, an all-sided critique of socialist-feminism is beyond the scope of this article; it will make up an essential part of the series on women's oppression planned for two future issues of *Line of March*.

racy as applied to the women's movement. As such, it should not be a surprise that it has failed to challenge the class and racial bias of that movement, that it has been unable to become a unified national force with a coherent strategy, and that it raises ultrademocracy virtually to a point of principle. The tragedy here is that socialist-feminism remains the dominant view among left elements in the women's movement precisely at a time when that movement needs a working class base, a strong sense of direction, an accountable leadership, and a conscious effort to transcend the scattered localist practice of many of its most committed forces.

The Tasks of Marxist-Leninists

Despite its profound shortcomings, socialist-feminism will probably retain its influence until a serious critique of its theory is developed, and until a more advanced political line and practice which does not liquidate the particularity and importance of the oppression of women supplants the economist legacy of the communist movement on this question. This is precisely the responsibility that now falls to our trend.

The first step toward fulfilling this responsibility is to make a thoroughgoing break with the liquidationist legacy that has long afflicted the communist movement on this question. Our orientation must be to recognize the importance of and fight for leadership within the movement for women's liberation, a major social movement against an ancient and all-pervasive form of oppression which is today thoroughly intertwined with capitalism. The struggle against women's oppression must be recognized for what it is—a revolutionary struggle in its own right and a crucial component of the overall revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

Once this orientation is firmly consolidated within the communist ranks, our theoretical and practical tasks in regard to the struggle against women's oppression come to the fore in all their concrete complexity. The communists must, in the first place, go beyond the initial building blocks presented here to develop a comprehensive analysis of the oppression of women in the conditions of advanced capitalist society; a detailed appraisal of the political forces arrayed in the struggle; and an all-sided political strategy that clearly points the way forward for the women's movement in taking up the particular struggle against women's oppression and the broader struggle against capital. Inevitably, these theoretical tasks will involve a critique of both the economist and socialist-feminist lines which presently dominate discussion of this question.

Yet even while the main focus of our activity is on theoretical work and line development, it is crucial to engage in the concrete contention in the women's movement itself. There are numbers of trend activists already working in the movement who, as communists, have the basis to develop

a common assessment of the main issues and key forces in the present period. The development of joint work and a careful summation process can serve to break trend activists out of their present isolation—from each other and from the movement as a whole—and begin to train a core of communists who are both expert in the politics of this particular arena and consistently aware of developments in the class struggle overall.

Undoubtedly, the theoretical gaps that still exist in our analysis of women's oppression will limit the effectiveness of our present intervention work. However, the forces on the offensive against women are hardly waiting for the communists to get themselves together before launching another round of attacks; and we believe the ideas developed here provide, in broad outline at least, the underpinnings of a strategic line to guide work in the women's movement in the coming period.

The starting point of such a line is that it is imperative to gather the many forces spontaneously taking up the defense of women's rights in this period into an effective and coherent cross-class front. The communist forces must be extremely broad-minded and skilled at forging working unity among the most diverse political and class forces if the present bitter assault led by the New Right is to be turned back. In particular, it is both possible and necessary to build an extremely broad front around the defense of the legal right to abortion, which presently occupies center-stage in the defense of women's rights. The communists have the responsibility to attempt to move to the very center of the broad front fighting the New Right, and to fight for the front to raise its political visions and conduct its work more effectively. Specifically, we must take the lead in arguing for systematic nationwide campaigns involving the broadest array of forces possible, for an emphasis on popularly-accessible propaganda to conduct the battle for public opinion, and for as much organizational coherence as possible to avoid wasted and duplicated effort. The communists, and not only those working within the women's movement, must struggle as well to win all working class and progressive organizations to embrace the fight against women's oppression.

Simultaneously with building a broad cross-class front for the immediate battle with the New Right, communists must take the lead in forging an activist working class detachment of the women's movement which from the outset sets as its goal becoming the dominant force in the women's movement as a whole. In part, the struggle to develop such a detachment will take the form of building specific organizations and campaigns based upon a working class line in order to build a political base among working class and, particularly, minority women. However, this work cannot be allowed to degenerate into the building of a safe "left stronghold" isolated from the mainstream of the women's movement. Rather, it must be accompanied by persistent struggle in the broad women's movement to win that movement to a working class orientation.

A linchpin of this struggle will be the fight to transform the very way in which the dominant forces of the women's movement today define the boundaries and nature of that movement. In particular, there can be no conciliation of the notion that "women's movement" means "white women's movement" or of the profound class and racial biases that give rise to such a backward view.

In essence, the communists must take the lead in fighting for the women's movement as a whole to take up the issues that most affect working class women; to draw out the differential impact of women's oppression on working class and particularly minority women; and for the women's movement to conceive of itself as one integral component of a broader struggle against monopoly capital.

Inevitably, this will place the communists in direct contention with entrenched forces who, consciously or unconsciously, act to maintain the present disoriented state of the women's movement. It will require significant skill to conduct this struggle while at the same time forging working unity around the immediate issues upon which the basis for unity exists. But this struggle is vital for the long range future of the women's movement and, for that matter, for the future of the working class movement as a whole. Unless the women's movement is revitalized, a process which can only come about as a working class line gains influence within it, the rights of women will be steadily eroded and this front on the battlefield with capital will be surrendered to the enemy. The consequences of this for women, and for the working class as a whole, would be disastrous. And while there are thousands of women who understand the dangers ahead, it is only the communists who have the basis to lead in doing something about it.