

WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND THE CP.

WHILE it is heartening to see some new attention being paid to the problem of women's liberation, it is disturbing to note that much of what is being published here is highly generalized and largely derivative from overseas writings, while most attempts to deal with the Australian reality do not meet the elementary requirements of Marxist analysis: concrete examination and interpretation of concrete facts.

Issue 28 of *ALR* illustrates a curious feature of a current trend: apparently only women (and selected women at that) are regarded as competent to speak about a major revolutionary task concerning both men and women, though some men may perhaps qualify if, like Marx and Engels, they are dead or if they are non-Communist.

Despite the sweeping charges made by the joint authors of the article "Paternalism and the CPA", there have always been, and still are, not a few male CPA members who have given a lot of attention, both theoretical and practical, to the problems of women's liberation, and the CPA's constitution has always explicitly accorded equal rights to all members, male and female.

Paternalism (or male chauvinism) has been and remains a major barrier to the realization of full rights for women in the Australian actuality, including the CPA, but it is not the only barrier. Women's acceptance of inferior status, both passive and active, is also a tremendous obstacle. The dialectic of human development in class-divided society is much more complex and protracted than the authors appear to believe. Mass resist-

ance to change, whether it comes from men, from women or from both together, cannot be overcome by mere rhetoric. It demands long-sustained, patient work around practical issues.

The article contains a number of statements about CPA attitudes to women which may or may not be true in the particular experience of the two authors, but are certainly not true of the CPA as a whole. We shall not get the kind of analysis they call for if we proceed from their rigid, unqualified and inaccurate premises.

In an effort to substantiate what appears to be their main argument — that the Party should not have committees specializing in work among women — they present a most uncomplimentary picture of the part played by women in the Party. If we are to believe them women Party members, with few exceptions, are spineless, unintelligent creatures. My experience is the opposite. Women have always played a major political — not merely menial — role in the Party organizations of which I have knowledge, often displaying broader understanding and more stamina than men.

This, together with CPA insistence on complete equality of male and female members has, I think, been one of the main reasons why the Party has attracted so many women to its ranks. If women play a major part in "such issues as peace, the rights of children, provision for child care facilities" does this necessarily "hamper and entrap" them?

Women are not and never have been organized within the ranks of the CPA on the basis of sex, as the authors assert. Nor has the Party thought that "the task of educating women, and raising their conscious-

ness, was the task of the women themselves". Party classes, cadre discussions, conferences, etc., at all levels have always been open to all members. A great amount of organizational and financial effort has gone into ensuring that the right of women to participate in these has not been merely formal. Many male members (including myself) have been happy to work and study under the leadership of women members.

Not only women but also — and, on occasions, especially — men have been involved by the Party in organized discussion and decision-making on how to help raise the consciousness of women and secure greater participation by them in the broad spectrum of struggle for revolutionary change. Male as well as female tutors have conducted study courses on this, with the active organizing assistance of District and State Committees — at least in Queensland.

All this is not to pretend that the CPA has solved the problem or even that there is not still a great deal of backward thinking and practice about it among both male and female CPA members. But I think we will get further away from, rather than nearer to a Marxist solution if we accept either the authors' description of the actuality of the CPA or their view that specialized committees for work among women are not needed.

"Are there any 'men's committees' " they ask, as if a negative answer to this would automatically dispose of "women's committees". This approach denies, in essence, the fact that women in capitalist Australia are doubly oppressed, as Mavis Robertson's article (correctly, to my mind) indicates.

Informed — and hence inspiring — work around the particular problems

created by this particular condition of half the Australian population demands specialized attention. This, of course, is a duty for men as well as women revolutionaries and men, because of their relatively better opportunities, should be expected to assume much more responsibility than most do. But it seems almost inevitable that the main burden of the direct work among the mass of women will fall on women, who are more intimately involved and more acceptable to most women. It is the masses of women who have to be aroused, not just an elite few.

If there is no need for specialized work among women, is there any need for specialized work in the unions or among youth? What of Aborigines, migrants, pensioners and other particularly oppressed sections of the people?

In none of these spheres can we feel contented about our work. But to forsake specialized attention (together with general effort to involve the whole Party) means, I think, to head for a Party without any relevance — an elite Party of magnificent generalizers about every problem but without expert knowledge of any. Such a Party would quickly end in the sectarian bog which has swallowed up far too many brilliant, impassioned but impractical revolutionaries in recent years.

I trust that, in the CPA's projected 1971 discussions about a programme for women, real effort will be made to involve the whole Party, not just those who can be got along without much trouble to occasional discussions, leaving the final formulations to a few.

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