

Women's Gains Face Capitalist Attack

In the early 1970's millions of women were electrified by the heady idea that they no longer had to accept a lifetime of submission. The women's liberation movement, inspired by the black upheaval and student struggles, won a number of victories. Tragically, the hopes raised for masses of women are now turning to dust; prosperity under capitalism is over, and with it have gone many of the gains women thought they had secured forever.

It is no consolation that past gains won by the working class are also being eradicated. Most women are part of that class, and given their special oppression, they are facing inflation, unemployment and eroding living standards even more harshly than men. The reason for these losses and those of minorities as well is the same, the enemy is the same, and the struggle to defend past gains and win new ones must be the same: it means overthrowing capitalism, whose recent history has again proved that even minimal gains for women cannot be tolerated for very long.

The enemy is not only the system itself but its overt defenders. Galvanized by the economic crisis and Reagan's election, right-wing and "pro-life" groups have concentrated their fire on women's rights. They are desperately attempting to preserve capitalism by reasserting the tradition of the male-dominated family through their defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment and crusade against abortion rights.

There is also an enemy within. From its birth the women's liberation struggle has been led by middle-class feminists, and this has proved its Achilles heel. Feminism is an ideology shared by both moderates and radicals which says that women's liberation can be achieved under capitalism and denies the decisive need for a united, class conscious working-class movement with a revolutionary program. This road has led to the present disaster.

NOW's Bourgeois Logic

The reformist strategy of the leading middle-class feminist organizations has backfired in failing to win the ERA. While this defeat by a resurgent right wing has dangerous implications for all women and the entire working class, the misdirection of women's struggles into a fight for the ERA was particularly bad for working-class women. As we pointed out in the article "Why We Oppose the ERA" (*Socialist Action*, November 1978), the bourgeoisie saw in the ERA a potential anti-working class weapon. This is why many capitalists threw their support behind it as early as 1923 when it was first drafted by the Women's Party, a middle-class women's organization that grew out of the suffrage movement.

The ERA encountered immediate opposition from labor and women's leaders as well as socialists who recognized that once the ERA was passed, protective legislation would be wiped out. While these laws were discriminatory against women in certain jobs and had not been extended to men, they nonetheless represented important concessions won by the working class from the bosses. They included minimum wages, specified rest periods, overtime pay and limitations on hours, heavy lifting and night work. The ERA would give the capitalists the excuse they needed to eliminate in one fell swoop these important protections.

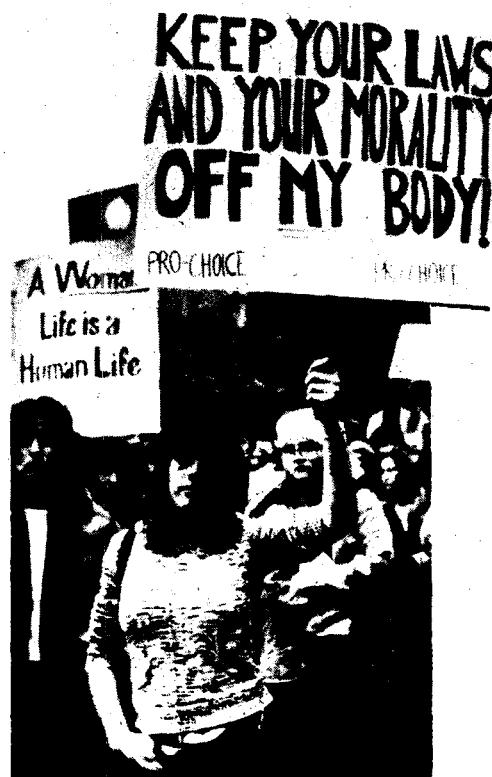
It wasn't until 1971-72 that the ERA passed Congress. By 1979 the ERA was only three states short of ratification and passage seemed certain. The unions, women's groups and leftists this time climbed aboard the ERA bandwagon. One argument used in defense of the ERA was that it would open

up rights previously denied women and that the ERA would prevent attacks on protective legislation. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, they said, would guarantee it. The opposite was true in fact. The ERA was deliberately vague legislation designed to appeal to divergent views. Its interpretation and implementation would have been left to the capitalist courts which do not serve workers' interests.

Groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW) also argued that protective labor laws were not only restrictive but unnecessary:

"These laws ... originally were passed to put a stop to serious exploitation of women workers in earlier days. Today, with the steady growth of unions and their influence, working conditions in general are far different from what they were at the turn of the century and these laws no longer protect women or they serve to restrict their chance for advancement."

This garbage could only have been written by upper-class women blinded by the temporary prosperity of the 1960's and ignorant of working conditions faced by proletarian women.



Such leaders who, together with the union bureaucrats, fail to fight capitalism bear a heavy responsibility for the defeats suffered by working women as capitalism attacks all workers to solve its crisis. The illusory ERA could never have guaranteed equality for women, nor could it have defended women against capitalist attacks. That is why the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and anti-union groups had no difficulty in supporting it before its defeat last June.

The potentially reactionary uses of the federal ERA were made clear in the case of Bonny Ann Fritz, a Maryland woman who planned to have an abortion against the wishes of her estranged husband, who took the issue to court. Anti-abortion

groups seized upon the ERA to press the courts into halting her abortion. The judge defended his decision to do so by saying that the husband and father's consent was necessary under the Maryland Equal Rights Amendment! Thomas Marzen, a lawyer for "Americans United for Life," admitted that the ERA has long been viewed as a "potential legal tool" of anti-abortion groups.

The more serious ERA supporters did not claim that it would result in new gains but held that its passage would be symbolic. But it would only have been a symbol of the illusion that equality can be achieved with the help of the NAM and its system! This upper-class attitude was further demonstrated by the women's groups who attempted to enlist the support of bourgeois politicians for the ERA by refusing to take a stand against the Hyde Amendment, which eliminated federal funds for abortion.

Given its potential use as an anti-working class weapon and given its diversionary character, why did sections of the bourgeoisie succeed in burying the ERA? Even an empty symbol of women's rights was too much for the reactionaries. They realized that the bourgeois family, especially in times of crisis, is essential to capitalist survival so that even a formal nod to women's liberation is threatening.

Moralist Enemies of Women

The abortion rights strategy carried out by feminist and even left groups has produced equally disastrous results. While right wing conservatives have been unable to gather enough support to strike down the 1973 Supreme Court ruling which legalized abortion, they have grown considerably bolder in their attempts. The latest in a series of amendments being debated in Congress include the "Human Life Federalism Amendment" of Sen. Orrin Hatch. The Hatch Amendment would eliminate the constitutional right to abortion and allow the states to pass abortion legislation only if it was more restrictive than the 1973 ruling. It would be left to Congress to determine whether or not a law was more or less restrictive. Sen. Strom Thurmond, another ardent reactionary, amended the Hatch proposal to eliminate Congress' role and give the states a free hand in passing anti-abortion legislation. Thurmond hoped to remove any liberal obstacles that might delay anti-abortion legislation from being enacted.

Another anti-abortion amendment introduced by Sen. Jesse Helms and supported by President Reagan led to a Senate filibuster until it was finally scrapped. The original version of the Helms Amendment would have reversed the 1973 Supreme Court decision by stating that life begins at conception. Abortion would therefore be considered murder. When Helms could not muster enough support for the bill, he then introduced a watered-down version which would have permanently prohibited the use of federal funding for abortion.

The assault on abortion rights has not been confined to Congress. Widespread violence against abortion clinics by extreme right wing groups has escalated. In Granite City, Illinois a gynecologist and his wife were kidnapped by a group which called itself the Army of God; it threatened to kill him unless he denounced abortion by signing a statement which declared the government to be "an instrument of evil" in "defiance of God's will." The same group took responsibility for arson attacks on two abortion clinics in Florida last May.

The bourgeois feminists and the leftists who tail them bear responsibility for cultivating the illusion that democratic rights are secure under decaying capitalism. The attacks by thugs, judges and politicians show that a mass struggle is needed. But if the democratic "rights" are aimed at undermining working class gains, no such movement will get off the ground. The

anti-working class bias of middle-class feminists is counterproductive to winning genuine gains for women's rights.

Women have also been fed the lie that in winning abortion rights they would have a real choice, whereas the truth is most women who have abortions are forced to do so by economic circumstances. Given the possibility of supporting them, many women would choose to have more children. Abortion is an ordeal; abortion clinics, like everything else in capitalist society, are run for profit. Working class women who go through these mills are often given poor medical treatment risking infection or worse. There are no greater enemies of women than the capitalist moralists who force women to have abortions and then label them murderers for doing so.

Marxists do not fight to destroy the family now. In crisis it is one of the few institutions that working people, women and men, feel they can cling to. Under communism it will disappear along with all other oppressive structures. But we do fight to defend every gain won under capitalism, many of which weaken the family but in such a way as to strengthen the



Dick Gregory talking to Women's Fast for the ERA hunger strikers in Illinois. ERA 'symbolic' struggle helped undercut real fight for abortion rights.

unity and confidence of the masses. We have participated in struggles for free abortion on demand, paid maternity leaves, an end to forced sterilization, free day-care centers, and others. In addition, it is vital that the working class lead a fight for jobs for all — men and women. We join with all who are willing to fight for these goals but openly explain that they cannot be made secure under capitalism.

That is, we support the struggle for democratic and economic rights for workers and all oppressed people not as a bourgeois abstraction but through the struggle for communism. Only the socialist revolution can create a state in which any of these democratic gains can be preserved. Only the workers' state can begin to end the fraudulent "democracy" which promises equality to exploiters and exploited alike. Freedom begins with the elimination of the oppressor and can only exist where there are no oppressed. For this task it is necessary to build the revolutionary party and program. This struggle will not be easily achieved, nor will it ever be achieved without a fight for state power and the rule of the working class. This is the real alternative for the women's struggle. ■