

THE PERSPECTIVE OF WAGES FOR
HOUSEWORK
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We in the Power of Women Collective who are organising on wages for housework base our perspective on the unwaged condition of the housewife. Her condition is the lowest common denominator for all women; through it we are all defined and imprisoned, Black and white, working class and middle class, "supported" and "unsupported", unwaged and partially waged. We begin with the housewife because her unwaged condition is our fundamental weakness. If this unwaged condition is our basic weakness, our perspective must be to deal with that. While the discussion in our small groups has always centred on the family and the woman's role within it, this fact has not been reflected in the politics or the organisational practice of our movement. The perspective of wages for housework does that for the first time. It aims at power for women to destroy their dependence on men and therefore to destroy their destiny as housewife.

We are not proposing, as others do, that the alternative to housework is factory work. These are two aspects of forced labour which we have to do because we need the money that capital gives us, either directly or through men, in order to live. This money we can get only by working in the home or out of it, but it is not payment for that work. It is just enough to subsist on so that we can continue to do that work. When we demand wages for housework what we are saying is that we need the money and we don't need the work. We are not proposing a productivity deal; we are not a trade union.

The question has come up that if we get a wage for housework we will have to do the work more thoroughly and put up with time and motion study men (or women). The fact that so many people raise this question shows that they do not see the struggle of the house worker as having the same objective as the struggle of the factory worker, that is, not to do forced labour, in the home or in the factory. Maybe they can't imagine that women can make an anti-capitalist struggle as men, and will always have to trade more money for more work. But the fact that factory workers will be offered a productivity deal doesn't prevent them from demanding a wage increase. The question is: are they strong enough to refuse more work? Nobody says: don't demand the money because you may be offered a productivity deal. Everybody says: go for more money and less work at the same time. That's what we as women propose to do.

The same principle applies to the question of where the money is to come from. We would never tell factory workers not to demand more money because capital will try to get it back from other workers. We say, as wage earners say, let it come from profits.

The struggle for liberation is the struggle for power. Does anyone believe that if we are strong enough to demand and win a wage for housework that when the time and motion study man (or woman) knocks at the door, any of us will let him in? In a rent strike when the collector comes he gets the door slammed in his face.

But we are not sold on one way of demanding wages for housework. There are many ways that the demand can be expressed. If we organise a croche in our street and demand that the council pay for it, that is wages for housework.

In fact, there is no part of a woman's life which is not founded in women's wagelessness in the home and therefore no place

where a struggle for ~~money~~ LOVA ~~be~~ made. The perspective of wages for housework uncovers the woman's complete work week, in the factory and in the kitchen. The fragmented life of a woman with its seemingly separate compartments is for the first time seen as a totality through the perspective of wages for housework. For example, we want control over our bodies. But this control is the power to demand birth control that works, that doesn't pollute our bodies; having children when we want them without dooming us to dependence on a man and to slavery in the home, and being able to raise children without constant financial worry and housing crisis; without having to be confined to heterosexuality; without having our arms and legs trained to follow the rhythms of an assembly line. "What about the children we want and can't afford? We are forced to demand abortion and sterilisation as we have been forced to demand jobs. Give us money and give us time, and we'll be in a better position to control our bodies, our minds and our relationships." (Women, the Unions and Work or what is not to be done, p. 16)

To demand money is to determine the grounds of the struggle. We agree with Marx that money is "universal social power" and this the ruling class knows as well as we do. In the context of demanding a wage, we're in a stronger position to get the work off our backs, and in a stronger position too to determine the terms on which this work is socialised. We don't want capitalism to socialise housework as it has socialised factory work and as it is socialising child care. We're fighting to socialise housework on our terms, not in order to take another job outside the home. The free time we win belongs to us.

The struggle for a wage for housework is the struggle to work less in the factory as well as in the home. It is because so much of her work is unwaged that the woman is in such a weak position in the factory. Women get lower wages because for housework they get no wage: there are always women at home desperate for a wage, however low. Women get lower wages because housework saps their time and energy to fight for higher wages. Women get lower wages because the men they work with think of them as their husbands do, as dependent, incapable, ignorant - "housewives".

Some people say that women's work in the home is not productive and therefore they should not get a wage. We believe that women's work in the home is productive in the Marxist sense. Some of us are doing work to show that this is the case. But our perspective of wages for housework, as we have tried to show, doesn't depend on whether or not women create surplus value. We repeat: we are not looking for a productivity deal - so much wages for so much surplus value. Our struggle is based on our need for money, on our need for power, on our need to undermine the power of men over us, to undermine the power of capital over us, and over men and children.

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