



# From slavery to socialism: An action programme for women in the USSR and Eastern Europe

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## An action programme for women in the USSR and Eastern Europe

Working women in the USSR and the rest of Eastern Europe are faced with twin dangers. The collapse of the Stalinist dictatorships threatens both the restoration of capitalism and the possibility of a hardline bureaucratic crackdown. The restoration of capitalism would bring untold hardship for the vast majority of women in the degenerate workers' states. But what, apart from the planned property relations, remains for working women to defend in the degenerate workers' states?

Women, like the rest of the working class, have no interest in defending the old bureaucratic regimes. They have no interest in defending the corruption, the inequalities, the poor quality of consumer goods, the inadequate supplies of food. The working class must ensure that the present political, economic and social crisis is resolved in their interests. Advancing towards women's liberation and true equality in the degenerate workers' states means defending those gains which have occurred for women, whilst fighting for the creation of a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat through political revolution.

Real liberation for women has nothing in common with the declared 'equality' of women in the USSR and the other degenerate workers' states. Women can only develop to their full potential when they are relieved of the burden of the family. The whole of society should ensure that its members are adequately fed, housed nurtured and cared for. It should not be the responsibility of each isolated wife and mother in the home.

A transformation on a massive scale will be needed to achieve this. It will require the redistribution of resources to meet the basic needs of all. It will require a total transformation of the culture and psychology which are so rooted in the family and its role.

Raising the standard of living of all to achieve women's liberation is not possible under capitalism or Stalinism. In different ways, both these corrupt systems are based upon the maintenance and extension of inequality. In particular the market is based on the exploitation of the many to meet the greed of the few. It is part of an economic system which can never feed, clothe and house the world's masses, let alone raise living standards to such a level as to allieviate women's burden.

The degenerate workers' states must be transformed into truly socialist societies, without which there can be no women's liberation. Under the rule of the working class the state can and will be able to plan the production of goods which people need, and distribute them in such a way as to relieve misery. In the next period women in the USSR and Eastern Europe need, simultaneously, to resist capitalist restoration and bureaucratic repression and take forward the fight for a democratic and revolutionary workers' state.

## For a woman's right to work!

The most immediate attack felt by many women is the loss of employment rights. Women must defend their jobs and their high level of participation in the workforce. No redundancies, no to 'women out first' solutions! Cut the hours not the jobs, share all available work with no loss of pay!

Managers and would-be capitalist bosses say that job cuts are necessary to make the enterprises profitable. In reply the workers must organise committees in each enterprise to distribute available work. They must open the books and scrutinise them to find out where the managers are syphoning off money and lining their own pockets. The workers, not the bosses, must control the work and the hours!

For women who work part time there must be full employment rights and equal rates of pay, but women should resist the moves towards expanding part time work. They should fight for a shorter working week for all, with time off for all workers to perform household and child-care tasks.

Although the vast majority of women are in paid labour in the USSR and most of Eastern Europe, their work is generally segregated and under-valued. Defence of the right to work should be carried out alongside a struggle to transform the nature of the work that women do.

There should be positive attempts to train women into jobs where they are under-represented, and men should be encouraged to enter areas of work currently regarded as 'women's work'. In order to make such opportunities a reality for women, training has to be provided alongside expanded child-care and social provision for children.

### **Equal pay for work of equal value!**

Women are segregated in low paid jobs and generally have far lower wages than men. Women must demand equal pay for work which is considered equal, not by the managers and bureaucrats but by committees of female and male workers. Part timers must be given equal rates of pay with full timers in the same or similar jobs. Inflation is a real and escalating problem in the USSR and Eastern Europe. The only way workers can defend their standard of living against inflation is to demand a sliding scale of wages, with a rise of pay for every rise in the cost of living. But it cannot be left up to the managers to determine the level of inflation?it is women who generally have to buy the food, clothe the family and therefore know the real cost of living. Committees of workers must determine the true rate of inflation and organise to force compensatory pay rises. Women will be essential participants in the price watch committees which set the wage claims.

### **Defend subsidies and price control?resist the rule of the market!**

Women bear the brunt of increased prices as subsidies are removed to make way for the profiteers. Resist all price rises, defend the subsidies and place prices under the control of committees of local workers and consumers and producers! Every day, women have to face the chaos in distribution which produces shortages and massive queues. Many shortages are caused by bureaucratic hoarding or the diversion of goods into special shops for those with privileges, or onto the black market. The whole distribution system must be transformed and placed under the direct control of the workers and consumers. Open up the special shops to all! Where real shortages exist there should be emergency rationing of basic goods under workers' control, giving priority to those in the greatest need. Women in particular know the needs for food and other consumer goods and must be involved in deciding production and distribution priorities!

### **For a workers' plan of production and distribution!**

When women and other workers take control of the factories, wages, prices and the distribution of goods, it will soon be clear that the bureaucratic plan and the new market mechanisms fail to meet even basic human needs. Neither the stagnating plan of the bureaucrats nor the chaos of competing enterprises under the 'rule' of the market can achieve this. The only solution is to take planning out of the hands of the bureaucrats and place it under the democratic control of those who know what is needed and what can be produced?the working class. Each individual factory, farm or distribution network cannot operate in isolation, even under workers' management. Planning requires the best use of available resources on a national and international scale, diverting investment from heavy industry towards consumer goods, massive investment in communications and transport, in housing and welfare.

### **Defend and extend social provision!**

Women should oppose the closure of kindergartens and nursery schools, and resist the imposition of fees for these services. The state must be forced to provide free, good quality child-care for all ages of children to enable the parents to work and participate in social and political activity. To ensure that quality is improved the control of these facilities must be taken into the hands of the parents and local workers' organisations. Children must be given the highest possible quality of education and care, including a conscious fight against sexist stereotyping.

For a massive programme of house building, with workers and women controlling the design to ensure adequate facilities for communal laundries, restaurants and social areas!

For a free and high quality health service with good quality after-care for those who are discharged from hospital. This will allow members of the family to continue working and not be forced to look after dependent relatives full time. For full social provision of care and recreation facilities for the elderly, the disabled and the chronically sick, under the control of the users of the services and local workers' representatives.

### **For the full socialisation of domestic labour!**

Improving state child-care and social provision will dramatically improve the lot of women. But it will not necessarily relieve them of the burden of responsibility for the family. For women to achieve full equality domestic labour must become a collective responsibility, with the state investing resources in expanding and improving all social facilities.

### **For women's rights to reproductive health care!**

In the USSR and Eastern Europe women have been expected to produce large families to meet the needs of the plan for more workers. Contraception is limited and abortion is either used as a brutal form of contraception, as in the USSR, or denied as it was in Ceausescu's Romania. To begin to control their own lives women must have the choice as to whether and when to have children. There must be free abortion on demand, and a massive expansion in the availability of contraception. Women should demand high standards of clinic facilities for abortions.

### **Protect women's maternity rights!**

Women should be entitled to a year on full pay around the time of a child's birth, with guaranteed re-employment in the same post and no loss of job status/grade. If a woman wishes to return to work earlier this must be allowed. Fathers should be given paternity leave of up to one year if they choose to care for the child. Maternity services should be expanded and the quality improved to reduce maternal and infant mortality. No work for women in jobs that threaten their reproductive functions?no heavy manual labour for pregnant women! Protection of all workers against the hazards of work in nuclear and chemical industries.

### **Defend and extend democratic rights! Full equality for women!**

In the USSR glasnost improved basic democratic freedoms such as the right to organise and publish, but these are constantly threatened with bureaucratic clampdown. In the Eastern Europe many democratic rights have been won but will be constantly under threat from either bureaucratic clampdown or capitalist restoration. The right to strike, to organise free trade unions and political parties and to publish material is essential if women's voices are to be heard. Women must have guaranteed full equal rights under the law. No legalised discrimination, no forced marriages! Civil marriages and non-registered marriages should have the same status. For immediate and easily available divorce at the request of one partner.

### **Against sexism!**

In the USSR and Eastern Europe women have been told for decades that they are equal to men in all ways, and that the 'woman question' has been solved. Yet women continue to be oppressed through their role in the family, their double shift of worker and housewife, their limitation to manual and semi-skilled labour. The continued acceptance of this situation as 'normal' by many workers, including women, is a function of the strong sexist ideology which portrays

women's central role as being in the family.

To overcome this, to allow women to express their discontent with their lives, to allow them to organise resistance to the physical and sexual abuse that some of them suffer, requires a conscious fight against sexism. Although women will never be fully liberated whilst private domestic labour exists, in the period of transition men must be encouraged to take equal responsibility for housework and child-care in order to begin breaking down the divisions between the sexes, and to allow women more opportunities for political, economic and social activity.

### **For sexual liberation!**

Sexuality is heavily repressed in the USSR and Eastern Europe, particularly for lesbians and gay men. This has worsened as the church has attained greater influence. There must be no discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, and there must be good quality sex education for all. Open discussions about sex and sexuality should be promoted, and the influence of the church must be resisted.

For the freedom of prostitutes from state harassment and the provision of good quality medical and social support for prostitutes, including re-training and alternative employment for those who wish to leave prostitution! No to bureaucratic censorship! For full freedom to publish sexually explicit material, including for gay men and lesbians.

### **For the complete separation of church and state!**

Religion must not be allowed to determine civil laws or impose its norms on women. No constitutional defence of the 'rights of the foetus'. No return to the bride price or enforced marriages! No to the veil! All education must be state organised and secular, with no religious schools permitted.

### **Build a working class women's movement!**

In fighting for all these demands and resisting the onslaught of the capitalist and the bureaucrat, women need to be organised. The existing organisations, whether the old Stalinist parties, the trade unions, the various parliamentary bodies or the new 'democratic' organisations and free trade unions, all under-represent women in their leadership and membership. Women are denied full participation in political life because of their continuing oppression in the home. A conscious struggle is needed to overcome these inequalities and mobilise women to take part in struggle and participate in the building of a new society which meets their needs.

In all workers' organisations, unions, political parties and representative bodies women should have the right to caucus, and have guaranteed representation on all levels of the leadership. In every factory, collective farm and locality women must organise committees to fight against the attacks they currently face, and to try and involve the largest number of women in activity through mobilising them in the home as well as at work.

Such organisation should not be counterposed to organising in the new independent trade unions, parties and workers' councils which develop. Rather they are a way of maximising the participation of women in these general class organisations. Brought together, such women's organisations can form a mass working class women's movement which will be central to the defence of women's interests.

### **For a proletarian political revolution!**

Whilst there are many defensive struggles over social provision and jobs, the most fundamental thing to defend in the USSR and Eastern Europe is the abolition of private property and capitalism. In the USSR this was an achievement of the revolutionary working class and marks a major advance. In Eastern Europe capitalism was bureaucratically overthrown, but once private property had been abolished it represented a gain for the workers.

It is therefore necessary to defend state property against selling it off to private investors. But this does not mean defending the existing bureaucratic planning which is unable to meet even the basic needs of the working class.

Planning of production and distribution can only meet the needs of the working class if it is democratically controlled with priorities determined by the producers and consumers together through a revolutionary workers' state.

### **Open the road to socialism and women's liberation!**

Only with such a state can the road to women's liberation be opened, leading to the emancipation of women from privatised domestic work and child-rearing. The democratic workers' state will immediately begin the socialisation of these tasks, aiming at a higher quality of provision than the isolated household can offer. It will draw men, women, the old and the young into the socialisation process.

Only this will enable the development of true equality for all in performing the necessary productive labour of society and receiving the benefits of this collective labour. Socialism and its higher stage, communism, are inseparable from the liberation of women; no communism is conceivable without women's liberation, and no women's liberation is possible without communism.

### **Build a revolutionary party!**

The political revolution can only take place with the conscious organisation of the working class, men and women, with a programme to take power out of the hands of the bureaucrats, to create a workers' state based on councils of workers at every level. To develop and carry out such a programme needs a new party of the working class. Not the Stalinist parties which have discredited socialism in the eyes of workers throughout Eastern Europe and the world, but a revolutionary, Leninist-Trotskyist party. Women will play a central role in this.

The revolutionary party must organise a fraction for work amongst all layers of women, with appropriate forms of propaganda and agitation. This section of the party should build a mass working class women's movement and seek to win these women to the revolutionary programme for the political revolution.

Build a mass working class women's movement!

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