

The Fight for a Working Class Women's Movement

Sun, 04/10/1992 - 23:00

Workers Power supports the Campaign against Domestic Violence (CADV), launched and politically led by Militant. We believe the campaign can carry out practical work to achieve measures to alleviate a real problem faced by many women. It also opens up the possibility of a political debate about the general struggle against the oppression of women.

The Campaign Against Domestic Violence has been built with a clear recognition of the class issues at stake in the struggle against domestic violence.

Many campaigns about violence, rape and other aspects of women's safety have been built by feminists who consider that class is either irrelevant or secondary to the issue. Feminism regards the oppression of women as resulting fundamentally from patriarchal structures of male power. They argue that since all women are affected, the key in fighting against oppression is to build a movement including all women.

Of course domestic violence, and violence outside the home, directly affects and intimidates women from all classes. But it remains a class issue in two senses. Firstly because working class women are much more vulnerable. They have fewer ways of leaving violent partners if they have no independent income or housing. They are less likely to have cars, nor can they afford taxis to avoid threatening situations.

Secondly, the underlying reason for the violence is not some innate 'male power', or biologically determined violent tendency of men. Rather it is linked to the fact that the family and society in capitalism are based on the exploitation of one class by another, of the workers by the bosses, and within this the oppression of women has remained a fundamental feature.

Women's downtrodden position within society is no accident. It is necessary for capitalism's survival, providing a cheap way of getting the housework and childcare done—almost exclusively by women, unpaid, even when they have another job. It also makes women a cheap source of labour when the bosses need more workers. It divides the workers with the daily propaganda which sets boys against girls, men against women, constantly telling us that women are inferior, weaker, emotional and best suited for jobs in or related to the home.

The violence against women is directly related to the dominant view of women: subordinate, obedient, seen as either nagging wives or sex kittens. All such roles cast women as potential victims of violent attack. The isolation of each family unit, the fact that what goes on in the home is private and not supposed to be talked about, increases this potential.

Domestic violence is a class issue not only because it affects working class women more, but also because to end it requires a fundamental transformation of society to get rid of the system, capitalism, that upholds the oppression of women.

This is why we welcome the chance to work in CADV and to discuss with women about how recognition of the class issues involved should influence our strategy for the campaign, and the wider fight against women's oppression.

Campaign

CADV faces several problems at the moment. Most importantly, what is the campaign doing and where is it going? There are several practical issues the campaign should focus activity around. Firstly we should continue to campaign for the release of women imprisoned for defending themselves against domestic violence.

The freeing of Kiranjit Ahluwalia in September is a victory, but there are still other women in prison. The change of Kiranjit's conviction to one of manslaughter has not clearly established whether years of abuse constitute provocation, and more cases will have to be fought out in the courts. The law should be changed to ensure that women like Kiranjit cannot be imprisoned for defending themselves.

The second focus of the campaign should be demands on local councils and the government to provide public funding for 24-hour emergency helplines staffed by qualified and trained workers, with a call out service of workers trained to deal with situations of domestic violence.

Some CADV branches are proposing that members of the campaign themselves set up help-lines. We are opposed to this. Workers should be properly trained and paid proper wages to do this work. It is not only difficult, requiring counselling and many other skills, it is also potentially dangerous. We should focus our energies on forcing the state to provide such basic and necessary resources, not substitute ourselves and provide an inadequate, unprofessional service. We are also opposed to women volunteering to do, for free, what many would consider a natural extension of their 'caring' role.

CADV should campaign for an increased provision of secure refuges for women and their children, and for permanent housing with adequate security. Refuges and housing for women who suffer violence is not enough. It is the lack of access to decent housing for all women, whether or not they have children, that leads many to stay in relationships that become violent. A massive spending programme on public, affordable housing is necessary.

The CADV must immediately clarify its position on the police. Whilst individuals suffering domestic violence may well turn to the police for help in desperation because there isn't any alternative, the long term solution to domestic violence does not lie with the police. However many domestic violence units and training programmes they set up, the police cannot avoid their serious, continuing, record of criminalising people who turn to them for help when they are attacked.

This is frequently the police's method in instances of racial attacks. The police end up charging the victims, not the attackers. The same is true in cases of domestic violence. Many women report how the police have refused to believe or help them, and have even abused them when they were seeking support against a violent partner. As the CADV information pack points out:

'Any attempts to improve the image of the police and encourage women experiencing domestic violence to call them will be undermined by repressive actions and their involvement in miscarriages of justice.'

This is certainly the case, but the practice of the CADV branches is not clear, with police invited to address meetings, for example.

The Militant leadership of CADV have produced a set of demands for the demonstration on 10 October. These include demands directly concerning domestic violence, but also demands for a minimum wage of

£190 a week, comprehensive childcare and other general anti-cuts demands.

These are important, but are they being raised in the right way, and how can CADV begin to campaign for such broad demands? Does the campaign's correct understanding of the class basis of women's oppression mean that it can mobilise the forces to achieve the 'bigger' things that women need to destroy the roots of domestic violence?

Tactics

Militant are not clear on the tactics and politics required to fight for a real end to women's oppression. CADV should campaign specifically around the issue of domestic violence, including practical help and demands for resources. These struggles should be taken into the unions to win action to press for the demands, but also to raise the issue for discussion with men and women in the unions and workplaces. It should also try to draw in women who don't have a job, through work on the estates and in community organisations.

However, to get jobs with decent pay for all women, good childcare, the abolition of the Child Support Act and other pieces of reactionary legislation—all this will take a lot more than CADV and its current forces. A single issue campaign cannot take up all the questions facing working class women nor can it involve wide enough forces to begin to win them.

This does not mean we should ignore the bigger questions, like pay, jobs, childcare, abortion, health care and housing. But to mobilise around them we need a much broader movement of women workers, unemployed women, housewives, young women, students. We need a movement of working class women based in all the areas where women are organised—workplaces, unions, tenants' associations, student groups.

The women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s was not able to achieve this, nor have the Labour Party or unions shown themselves serious about fighting against the oppressive conditions under which many women have to live their daily lives. The all-class approach of the feminists and the reformist tokenism of the labour movement have squandered countless opportunities to win real gains for working class women.

In calling for a working class women's movement, we are not saying that only working class women would be part of it. But women from other classes would have to recognise the need to join and support the struggles of working class women. They would have to be won to a class perspective on the fight for women's liberation.

A working class women's movement would be led by working class women, linking up action groups, campaigns and caucuses in different unions and communities, building working class action to fight for its demands. Strikes, occupations, and solidarity action would be central.

A working class women's movement would need to break out of the reformist traditions which dominate the labour movement in Britain, because any lasting change to women's position requires a direct struggle against capitalism.

The need for a working class women's movement flows from the reality of the class struggle. In almost every big working class struggle, women have begun to organise in their own groups, either building solidarity (see the article on the miners' wives), or as a way of raising their own demands in the male-dominated labour movement. Women need a broad and active movement to fight for their immediate demands, with the political capacity and leadership to take those struggles further and secure genuine advances for women.

The formation of a mass working class women's movement in Britain would be a massive step forward in the fight against women's oppression. But it would also be a step forward for the whole working class which is weakened by the sexist divisions fostered by capitalism and upheld by the reformist bureaucrats.

Whilst all sorts of women with different political ideas would unite in the movement to fight for specific common actions, revolutionaries would seek to win arguments and action around our own programme and politics.

This is not a cynical attempt to manipulate women, and certainly there should be no political restrictions on who could join (except fascists). It is a way of engaging women in open debate, arguing that the movement itself cannot achieve full liberation unless it becomes part of a revolutionary movement against capitalism, led by a party committed to the overthrow of the bosses' state.

How does all this relate to the present direction of the CADV? A mass working class women's movement, raising the issues of women's oppression, including domestic violence, in all the organisations of the labour movement, providing support for women and active campaigns for resources, would be a great step forward.

Interests

Working class women will fight for their interests, but in isolated struggles that are easier for the bosses to defeat. There are women in local authorities, the health service and industry who are trying to fight the current wave of cuts and job losses. All too often they are isolated, get no support from the official unions and can see no way forward.

A working class women's movement would help these women to learn from other women's experience of struggle and enable them to take the issues into the wider union movement and win solidarity.

This is not a utopian project, but there is a lack of leadership to build such a movement. Militant's tactics in CADV are not clear about how to take the struggle for women's liberation and socialism beyond the immediate issue of violence. They know that wider demands must be taken up, but are not putting forward the arguments for building a mass movement.

Of course CADV itself cannot become a working class women's movement. Nor will such a movement be built overnight. But if we do not argue for it and seek to get CADV to play a role in actually building it then we will not even be taking a step towards the formation of such a movement. And it will not develop spontaneously.

The biggest movement of working class women in recent years was the miners' wives movement. Even that could not transform itself from a support group to a broader working class women's movement, because it lacked the political leadership to do so.

Militant have so far refused to take up this fight seriously. We urge all those involved in the CADV to discuss the working class women's movement. The campaign could then be used to take the argument into other sections of the working class, other women's organisations and launch the struggle for a lasting answer to women's oppression.