

**Women's pay remains much worse than men's. The equal pay momentum of the seventies has ground to a halt, and the reasons lie in the basic inequality between women and men.**

Beatrix Campbell

## Women: not what they bargained for



It is still unclear how socialist forces in Britain will re-group out of the debacle of the 70s and come up with a popular political programme. Unity is constantly invoked in such difficult times, which usually means people don't want to answer for their recent past, and that as long as we stick together we'll win. But win what? For whom? And how? Proponents of unity often seem blissfully ignorant of the conflicts of interest within the working class, and of course, charge those who feel penalised by the sexual or racial divisions within the class with the slur of divisiveness.

The fact is that class struggle has been waged for too long too much in the image of 'me Tarzan, you Jane' — crude, conservative and chauvinist. And it has contributed not a little to the political dark ages in which we now find ourselves. For too long feminism has found itself on the margins of socialist politics, critical, powerless and excluded, claiming special needs, treated as a special problem. Feminism *does* have something to say, however, which strikes deep at the heart of what class struggle is about. This article is concerned with our recent political history, and future political strategy, and starts with a simple question: what's in it for women?

It originates in a long period of consciousness-raising by a group of socialist-feminists working together in the women's liberation journal *Red Rag*. Our consciousness-raising was preoccupied with our feelings about the crisis of the Left towards the end of the seventies, and with personal dilemmas experienced by women with children, in trying to operate within a labour market that defines breadwinners as persons who are not responsible primarily for their own domestic reproduction or that of their children — as men. It was that dilemma which led us to discussion of the structure of work and male trade union priorities. Our critique emerged in two articles — 'Work to Rule', written with Valerie Charlton, in 1978 and 'United We Fall' in 1980, which proposed an alternative approach, a socialist feminist strategy for struggles in the sphere of waged work.

### Pay

Both the government and the labour movement entered the 70s knowing that the Equal Pay Act would only have a limited effect on the entrenched financial inequality of women, not least because it only compared 'similar' work. The government itself admitted that the Act would probably only add about 3% to the national wages bill. Some elements of the labour movement had been reluctant to legislate for equal pay, and stressed that it should be a matter for collective bargaining. As it turned out the Act did provide the most important focus for equal pay struggles in the 70s, and collective

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bargaining was also the major instrument of implementation in the face of machievellian activities by employers' organisations to circumvent its impact. In 1969, women overall earned less than half the male average overall. By 1975, the deadline for implementation, women had achieved 58% of men's overall earnings. By 1978 it was clear that the slight improvement would be stalled. This is indeed what happened. *Labour Research* pointed out in January 1979 that the trend in the 70s to narrow the sex differential was now in reverse. The 1978 New Earnings Survey showed that while male manual workers gross weekly earnings rose by an average of 13.4%, manual women's pay rose by only 12.9% and while non-manual men went up by 13.9%, non-manual women went up only 12%.

Why did the equal pay movement prove inadequate? Not only was the legislation limited, but it failed to tackle fundamental inequalities in the labour market between men and women. The labour

market is characterised by a sexual division of labour, which establishes men as 'breadwinners'. Women are primarily seen as domestic labourers whose wage labour is organised as supplementary and subordinate to men. The breadwinners' wage is conceptualised as the 'family wage', supposedly sufficient to maintain a wife and children in a relation of dependency.

### The family wage debate

The family wage has been the fulcrum of a debate among feminists over the last few years, which has also asked the question what are wages for, and what interests are expressed in collective bargaining? We argued in the *Red Rag* articles that the family wage constituted a barricade against women's incursions on male privilege in bread and butter bargaining, and that a feminist wages policy must assault the concept as it operates in both the social security and wages systems. Not to do so would be to acquiesce in women's economic inequality.

The notion of the family wage developed in the nineteenth century with the rise of industrial capitalism. Women's subordination preceded capitalism, of course, but patriarchal relations were built into capitalism in new forms. Trade union organisation belonged to men, specifically skilled men, and the history of trade unions' defence against the power of capital in Britain was characteristically associated with craft and sex chauvinism. Male chauvinist trade unionism campaigned in the nineteenth century to expel women from the labour market, to corral them into a privatised domestic sphere, to remove them as competitors in the labour market by rendering them economically and sexually subordinate within the home. This process was expressed in the idea of the family wage — a male breadwinner's right to earn enough to keep his wife and children in dependency.

Jane Humphries has charted the development of the concept in an essay on capitalism and the persistence of the working class family.<sup>1</sup> The ideology of the family wage was instrumental in making women subordinate in both wage labour and in the family. It also reflected the way in which industrial capitalism took a patriarchal form. Male-dominated trade unionism, Humphries argues, promoted the patriarchal family, and adopted forms of defence which involved not acting on behalf of the whole class, but acting to regulate the labour of women. The effect was to reinforce 'sex-based relations of dominance and subordination.'

### Its effects

Humphries records a labourer's plea in 1825 to fellow workers to limit 'the number of those who work for wages, to prevent their wives and children from competing with them in the labour market.' She herself is not wholly out of sympathy with the trade unions' systematic campaign to evacuate women from wage labour and instal them in the home. Many feminists have contested her conclusion that, as a result, the working class family was saved from the intrusions of the capitalist market, and have also criticised her treatment of the effects on women's lives. According to Phillips and Taylor, for example, the form of craftsmen's battle with capital over control of the supply of labour and labour process involved the 'sexualisation of skill.' Because the main protagonists were men the result was that 'skill has been increasingly defined *against* women.'<sup>2</sup> Other feminists have argued that the family cannot be understood without reference to the 'terrain of compromise' between capital and labour'. . . the family wage . . . assured the continued existence of the family as a necessary income-producing unit. The family, supported by the family wage, thus allows the control of women's

labour by men, both within and without the family.<sup>3</sup>

Hilary Land has shown that 'once established, the idea of the family wage has been strongly defended. It was feared that any weakening of the concept might have a damaging effect not only on men's pay, opportunities and incentives in the labour market, but also on women's incentives to provide domestic services in the home.'<sup>4</sup>

Land documents the contradictory forces within the working class ranged against interference with the men's control of family incomes, as represented in the concept of the family wage. Eleanor Rathbone campaigned within socialist and feminist circles for family allowances, and the replacement of the family wage by a minimum wage sufficient for a single person plus collectively funded child allowances aimed at revolutionising the system of child support and women's dependence. But this approach — which we support as a feminist strategy in contemporary politics — met with much opposition.

We argued in 'Work to Rule' that the trade union movement speaks with forked tongue on women's pay. 'The labour movement has managed to combine a commitment to equal pay with a commitment to the family wage. You can't have both.' The only way we can overcome this is by waging an assault on the residual fortifications of male privilege in the wages system.

### Time

We have seen that the wage system expresses an intractable relation of dependence and domination between men and women. The financial differential must also however, be understood by reference to men and women's different relation to working time.



<sup>1</sup> Jane Humphries, 'Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family,' *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, No 3 Sept 1977.



While full-time domestic labour has dropped dramatically, being now confined almost exclusively to pensioners, unemployed women and mothers of pre-school children, mothers' participation in the waged workforce stands in sharp contrast with that of fathers.

It is a commonplace among trade union negotiators that women always give priority to time. Partly, of course, their financial dependence on men, and men's expectations to earn more, colours their financial priorities. But certainly, women trade unionists tend to attach greatest priority to time — time off, and their own time.

Men and women also experience the politics of time differently. Again, it is conventional wisdom among negotiators that male workers will often view campaigns for a shorter working week as an indirect wage rise (because they seem to increase the opportunities for overtime) whereas for women it means real time off. Historically, both employers and unions have tended to regard women's commitment to a short working week as expressing lack of commitment to

employment, a sort of backwardness. This originates in the equation of full-time work with men's work. But men's relation to waged work is dependent on someone else, a woman, taking care of their household. Fatherhood does not interrupt their work. In other words men's domestic under-achievement makes them the models for full-time employment.

Women's equality has generally been assumed to mean their participation in the labour market on men's terms. We argued in 'Work to Rule', however, that women's relation to working time, domestic time, children's time and their own time should be taken as a model for campaigns around reduced working time. This would mean that the model for full-time work would correspond to children's schedules in nurseries and schools — parents and children's time could be synchronised in ways that are today only achieved in the main by childcare centres in the voluntary sector or child minders, and even then only partially. And among adults in the work force, the establishment of working time that corresponded to parents' needs would erode mothers' disadvantageous position in the labour force. What this needs is a leap of imagination — instead of taking men's working week as the model, and campaigning for women's 'special' needs, women's working could be taken as the model, with political priority given to a massive reduction in hours, abolition of the contractual and financial disadvantages of part-timers, and the right to flexible time and time off. It is only in this political context that women *en masse* can confidently demand equal shares of domestic duty. This political approach would challenge the ways in which men's parental passivity is rewarded, while women's parental activity is punished.

### Job segregation

What the struggles around the Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act confirmed was that equal pay as such would not budge the apartheid between men and women in the jobs they actually do. While it was true that after World War II women re-entered the labour force on a massive scale, it was also true that they were entering a more intensely segregated jobs market. We knew it was bad — but just how bad? 'Changes have often been in the direction of greater segregation rather than integration of the sexes in the work sphere.' Catherine Hakim's research showed that 'women were not being drawn into male-dominated occupations, but into slowly-expanding female dominated occupations for which the supply for single women was inadequate.'

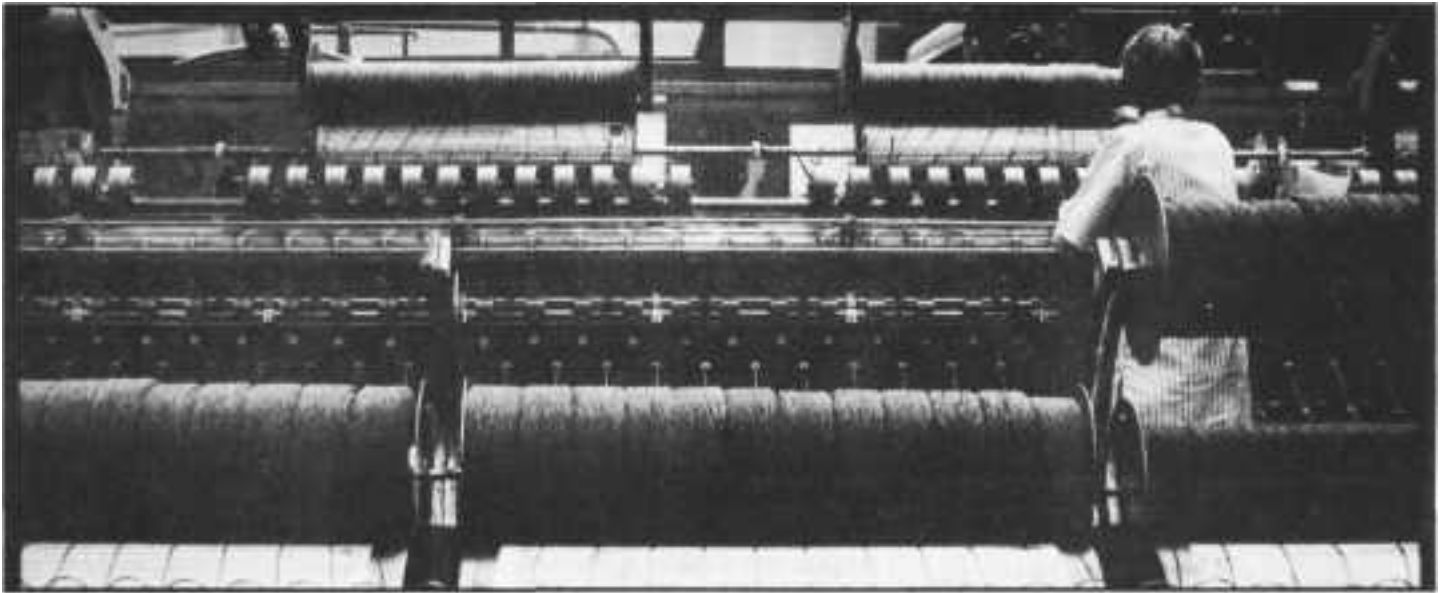
In addition, access to jobs deemed skilled has changed dramatically over the course of the century. Among manual workers, the proportion of women at the beginning of the century was around 30%. Of these 24% were regarded as skilled. By 1971 only 13.5% were deemed skilled. The proportion who were unskilled at the beginning of the century was 15.5%, which by 1971 had more than doubled to 37.2%. A similar pattern emerged among white collar workers.

So, women may no longer be barred from waged employment, but the terms on which they gain access are intensely discriminatory. Many feminists in the trade union movement have come to the conclusion that the equal pay movement of the 70s must be converted into a positive action programme to create equal opportunities, on the grounds that it is job segregation that creates the inequalities. While this is true, it must not divert attention from the ways in which privileges associated with certain jobs remain a matter of power and bargaining muscle — properties from which women have been dispossessed. Thus, what is at stake for feminist trade unionism is not just positive action campaigns, but an assault on the labyrinth of differentials and hierarchies which set workers in competition with each other.

### Hours in waged work

	Men	Women
Under 36 hours	1.5% (manual)	30.5% (all women)
36-40	46% (all men)	6.1% (all women)
over 48	27.8% (manual) 19% (all men)	1.4% (all women)

Figures taken from New Earnings Survey, 1977.



### Differentials

It is worth recalling that when the Ford sewing machinists went on strike in 1968, it was not actually for equal pay. They wanted to be re-graded, and made equivalent to semi-skilled production workers. The unions fought for equal pay within their grade, which was achieved. What the women never got, however, was the upgrading they had struck for in the first place. Some trade unions during the 70s did attempt to attack the effect of differentials and arbitrary gradings. In particular TASS, the white collar section of the engineering union, developed the concept of Men's Pay for Women to deal precisely with those cases where women might have no comparable group of men with whom to compare themselves. If a man was doing her job, what would he be paid? Many of their pay struggles involved not so much equal pay as re-gradings. But even this sort of strategy founders on the rock of differentials.

If job segregation is a major obstacle to women's economic equality, then it follows that we must ask what turns on that segregation.

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It is of course differentials. And just as job segregation must become a target of positive action programmes, so must differentials become target of feminist attention. Clearly, you can't say simply abolish differentials. It may be that a strategy for women could be to consolidate differentials in certain instances. What is being suggested is rather that differentials are not immutable, and that they are not immune from political pressure. Political action which increases or consolidates differentials is likely, in general, to be anti-feminist. Political action which erodes differentials is likely, in general, to be pro-women and pro-the poor.

### Pay and politics

How has the politics of pay impinged on this situation over the last decade? The political skirmishes which took place during the 60s and 70s around pay were particularly relevant to women, since this was the conjuncture in which women entered the political stage as a force for the first time in decades. There are two aspects of the period which shall be discussed here: — the role of the National Board for Prices and Incomes (formed in 1968 and disbanded in 1971) in helping to lay down the official framework within which women's

pay and low pay were evaluated during the 70s; — the social contract and the debate around free collective bargaining.

The National Board for Prices and Incomes and the national debate before and after the social contract are important for what they reveal about the ideological fortifications of male chauvinism.

The NBPI's work framed the parameters of low pay policy during the decade. In this sense its ideological as well as its pragmatic programme had weight in the 70s beyond its own institutional existence. The terms of reference it laid down at the beginning of the decade influenced the powerful official machinery wheeled out at the end of the decade to adjudicate in many public sector pay struggles, which makes its history particularly relevant to women.

The Board argued in one of its reports that it was 'necessary to consider the position of men and women separately; otherwise the problem of low pay could be practically synonymous with that of low pay among women, and this could ignore the social significance of the fact that men's earnings are normally the main source of family income . . .'<sup>6</sup> In a plethora of reports on low-income industries the Board ratified women's inequality either on the grounds that they were not low paid compared to women in general, or that their wages were supplementary to the breadwinner.

Moreover, if there is any doubt about the resilience of the NBPI's influence, or of the family wage concept, we only need to look at the operations of the Clegg Commission on Pay Comparability at the end of the seventies. It systematically favoured the high paid, and discriminated against the lowest paid women's grades by awarding them the lowest percentage increases, often well below the rate of inflation.

### Trade union attitudes

But it was not only among the employers and their ideologists that the concept of the family wage/women's dependency thrived. The

<sup>J</sup> Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, 'Sex and Skill, Notes Towards a Feminist Economics, *Feminist Review* No 6, 1980.

<sup>J</sup> Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, in *Capital and Class* No. 8/1979.

<sup>J</sup> Hilary Land, 'The Mantle of Manhood', *New Statesman*, 18/25 December, 1981.

<sup>\*</sup> Catherine Hakim, 'Occupational Segregation', *Research Paper No 19*, Dept of Employment, 1979.

<sup>'</sup> NBPI Report No 169, General Problems of Low Pay, Cmnd 4648, HMSO London 1971.

trade unions answered the employers case with the same *imprima-tur* of women's subordination within the family.

'... the Commission should bear in mind that the most obvious comparison for many of the lower-paid grades and earnings within local authorities manual work at the moment must be a comparison with the net earnings they might be entitled to, were their income determined by supplementary benefit rates and the official poverty line... Taking males and females together in 1978 about half of all full-time workers in local authority services were earning less in terms of their net earnings than a *typical family* would obtain through social security...'

The union case was modelled on Supplementary Benefit rates for married men with dependent wives and children. This was a model of a 'typical family' which had little bearing on reality. In 1981 the Department of Employment disclosed that its figures showed that

**a cult of militancy which assumed that the low paid would be rewarded by the efforts of the higher paid**

only 5% of the workforce headed such a 'typical family'. Employers have been known to respond to such arguments by saying, with reference to their female employees, that since they were female, and perhaps part-time, the SB benchmark and poverty line arguments were irrelevant.

Having said all this, the trade union movement, particularly in the public sector, made strenuous efforts to hoist their members' relatively low pay, and to equalise men and women's hourly rates. NUPE was especially successful, and foregrounded the interests of its lowest-paid women members.

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Concentrated efforts, like NUPE's, were being made the context of debate within the trade union movement itself about the failure of collective bargaining to shift the relative impoverishment of women and the low-paid. Unfortunately for the Left in the labour movement, consciousness of this problem was trawled by the Right in defence of wage restraint during the period of the social contract. The TUC leadership accepted restricted growth in consumption, something to which the Left was opposed.

#### Low pay and women

In 1974, the year in which Heath's Conservative government was defeated and Labour was elected on one of its most radical programmes, the TUC Economic Review affirmed free collective bargaining, but took the initiative in calling for a 'new approach' by negotiators to reform 'outdated pay structures.' It suggested an attack on low basic rates, attainment of 'reasonable minima' and 'more effective priority to eliminating discrimination against certain groups, particularly women.'

The Right stole the ideological initiative during the first couple of years of the social contract, while the Left retreated into a sort of sulk.

The £6 flat rate increase in Phase One of the social contract appeared to stymie a militant response because among the organised low paid it was admitted among consenting adults in private that it was better than they could have hoped for in the normal course of events. The Left was indeed correct in arguing that the social contract did not tackle the real crisis in the British economy, but it failed to present an alternative *democratic* wages strategy of its own.

The Right appeared to capture a political moment by raising the interests of the low paid and women, in the context of a critical review of 'outdated' bargaining priorities. It should be said that the



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Right's efforts were not commensurate with its rhetoric — as ever it was simply concerned with the administration of consensus and the evasion of struggle — an approach best expressed in the words of engineering leader Duffy who once said of a national wage settlement 'this is the best we can get without a struggle.' Lest the vitriol should be seen to be solely reserved for the Left in this article, it ought to be said that this argument comes from the Left and is a dialogue within the Left. We are less concerned with the failures of the Right, which were predictable, than with the failures of the Left, which were much more problematic for feminism.

### Being serious about women

This is a conversation within the Left, and the central point is that at a crucial moment in women's politics the Left appeared to be stuck in a macho mud. It invoked class struggles as a response to the Right's class collaboration of the mid-seventies, but it failed to identify which bits of the class were to benefit. It clung to a cult of militancy which assumed that the low-paid would be rewarded by the efforts of the higher paid, without recognising that this pattern would only reproduce the balance of relativities which were precisely the problem when what women workers needed was a redistribution within the working class, as much as redistribution between classes.

After the debacle of the IMF loan, and the failure of the social contract to benefit the working class, the Left returned to the offensive within the TUC and a return to free collective bargaining was secured. But it was restored on the bandwagon of differentials, which in a sexually segregated labour market meant that women had nothing, relatively speaking, to gain. The movement scurried back to its old, butch standards. As Lord Allen, chairperson of the TUC put it, there would be reward for effort, skill and commitment. The Left failed to differentiate its campaign for the return to free collective bargaining from the *orm* and *content* advocated by the Right.

Bob Rowthorn, in his book *Capitalism, Conflict and Inflation* implicitly notes precisely the problem, that unless politics was to the fore, 'the Left is forced to appeal to purely sectional interests . . . this stores up trouble for the future.' He added that the Left made demands for a return to free collective bargaining as if it were an end in itself, unrelated to the content of political transformation. If the Left were to take on board the design of what Sam Aaronovitch, in his book *The Road From Thatcherism*, describes as a progressive wages policy of its own, then it would have to be seen to be assimilating the interests of women, taking to its heart women's ways and women's wants in the sphere of workplace politics.

### A feminist wage policy

So, what would a progressive feminist wages policy look like? A contribution to this question comes from a summary of the package proposed in *Red Rag*, as a minimum condition for women:

- \* A target for reduced working time of a 30-hour week for all, which would have at its centre a campaign to democratise domestic work;
- \* The abolition of contractual differences between full and part-timers;
- \* Abolish the concepts of family wage and the male breadwinner as they operate in the wage and welfare system;
- \* Campaign against women's dependence on men and forms of wage bargaining which protect men's privilege in the wage system;
- \* Challenge the sex differential by, where appropriate, awarding proportionately greater increases to women, and adopting the flat rate tactic. The flat rate across the board is an important device in hoisting women's and low pay, and pushing the boundaries of women's pay struggles well beyond the limits of the Equal Pay Act. Flat rate is supported by many socialists in the labour movement,



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and has a particular resonance among women;

- \* Establish a target national minimum wage;
- \* Remove child maintenance from the terrain of wage bargaining by fighting for child support commensurate with the cost of children, and of child care, socially funded and determined at the political level;
- \* Establish an award to wageless women equivalent to the pension, sickness benefit or student grant, during the period in which parents are on leave from employment due to parenthood. This could be done by massively extending and increasing maternity benefits.
- \* Expand the boundaries of collective bargaining to those aspects of income determined at the political level and to embrace a critique of plus a campaign for the social wage. Clearly women have a specific investment in the social services which can only be given fullest expression in political rather than industrial terms. Defence of the social wage and therefore employment and services for women must straddle workplace and state politics.

What this amounts to is a major wage offensive for women, a social campaign which places women and the care of children at the centre of the political stage. O

\* Initial Submission on Behalf of Local Authority Manual Workers by the Trade Union Side of the Local Authority (Manual Workers) Joint Industrial Council to the Clegg Commission on Pay Comparability.