



Debate...

Below we carry responses to Beatrix Campbell's 'How the other half lives' and Jon Bloomfield's 'Crossed Lines', which appeared in the April issue

ANN PETTIFOR Women and the Labour Party

Bea Campbell's analysis of the Labour Party's chauvinism in the April issue of *Marxism Today* was acutely perceptive. In it she correctly and boldly challenged the structures, organisation and party that Labourism has created, and rightly asserted that these political structures 'have alienated the people and left them with the pain of their own powerlessness.' 'Labour', she wrote '*created* mass alienation from the process of politics itself. It de-politicised the people. It reduced them to consumers. So what could have been the classic case of social democracy's success has become the classic case of its failure.'

There is nevertheless, an important but unanswered question that arises from Bea Campbell's analysis: how *are* the people to be empowered? For women on the Left, the concern is particularly with the majority: how are the women of our class to be empowered so that they may enjoy economic independence from men; the freedom and right to paid work; and the political power necessary to bring their values to bear on a society torn asunder by the masculinist militarism, and divisive 'monetarism' imposed by a woman leader of right-wing conservatism.

For an answer to this major political and organisational problem, Bea Campbell directs us to the solution that has been on offer from the Communist Party since (according to Jon Bloomfield in the same issue) the 'major modernisation of its programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, in 1977. Alliances. She joins Hobsbawm, Bloomfield and many others in once again urging alliances upon us: between men and women, and between 'the people and the people's parties'. Alliances in which 'different political and social forces encounter each other, enter into dialogue and are transformed by each other.'

Bea goes on to argue earnestly for dialogue: 'what is at stake for the Left and the labour movement now is whether the necessary *conversation* (my emphasis) between the people and the people's parties is one that the parties are prepared to have.'

Now as far as I know Bea has been

around the labour movement for a long time; she knows as well as the rest of us hardened and toughened old cookies in the Labour Party that the men are not interested in 'conversations' let alone alliances! That there are those in the Labour Party who enjoy a monopoly of the labour movement's power — and who are not prepared to concede an ounce of it to the poor and the powerless — whether they be council tenants, the Communist Party, the Greenham peace campaigners — or the majority within their own movement, women. To expect them to 'enter into dialogue and to be transformed' is to go down the British Road to Nowhere. Labour Party women have walked that road for some time now; the name of the slough they came to was Despond.

But Bea does *hint* at the necessary solution in her piece when she argues that: 'Labour *depended* on the peace movement to do the *work* that put war and peace on the political agenda. It was Labour's task *only* to express that political work electorally.' In this straightforward electoral task, Labour failed dismally.

Why men and not women?

What is needed therefore is a strengthening of organisational and political links between the extra-parliamentary campaigning that is present and necessary in a healthy democracy — and the party, Labour, vested with the *political power* to give effect to those campaigns. Certainly the Right have these links. The extra-parliamentary power of the CBI, the Freedom Association and the Institute of Directors, not to mention the Women's Institute, is strongly linked — both financially and organisationally — to the political power of the Conservative Party.

Which brings me to the single and most glaringly hypocritical aspect of all this talk of 'alliances'. It is expressed openly in Jon Bloomfield's article in the April issue, in which he argued that the Communist Party's programme 'recognises that social movements arise from specific contradictions in society not reducible simply to class. The (Communist) Party welcomes and seeks to strengthen the women's liberation, anti-racist, environmental and nationalist movements . . . As peoples,

rather than class-based, movements it is inappropriate to seek to attach them organisationally to the Labour Party. In this sense they are clearly different from trade unions'.

Women, Brother Bloomfield, are not going to be conned by that little aside. Why is it in order for trade unionists (ie, men) to be organised and attached to the political power of the Labour Party, and not women, blacks and environmentalists? Why is it in order for men, organised within their trade unions, to be defined as a class, and not women — unorganised, dispersed and isolated in their council flats, suffering 'the pain of their own powerlessness'? Why must women form 'alliances' while men 'attach' their organised power to the political power of the Labour Party?

As far back as 1920, that strong Fabian feminist, Barbara Drake argued that: 'between unorganised women and organised men, there can be no agreement.' We, of the Labour Women's Action Committee would go further and argue: between unorganised women and organised men, there can be no alliances, no unity and never any equality. For this reason we are active within the Labour Party, clearing the ground, creating the political space, building the necessary structures, changing the constitution, so that *women* can organise for political power. It is a momentous, unpleasant and often very messy, but absolutely key struggle — to empower the majority of our dispersed, isolated and powerless class.

But as Bea herself points out, we are opposed in this task by our new 'progressive' leader, who like so many men in the party, 'fears a constituency that can't be controlled'; and who it appears is only able to define us in terms of other men — 'the men who would use us to gain tactical advantage'. More damagingly we are opposed by women within the party: Gwynneth Dunwoody, Marie Patterson, Betty Boothroyd, and Judith Hart — to name but the most prominent — have all sided with the trade union bloc vote against us.

Their self-protective sense of repulsion can be understood in a paraphrase of Andrea Dworkin's thesis. Because feminism in the Labour Party is a movement

for the liberation of the powerless by the powerless, in a closed system based on their powerlessness, (ie, the women's organisation) right-wing women judge it a futile movement. Frequently they also judge it a malicious movement in that it jeopardises the bargains with power (ie, men) that they have made. (See Dworkin: *Right Wing Women* published by Women's Press).

Achieving our objective — the political organisation of the women of our class — requires us therefore to overcome some quite formidable resistance. It would be a great help in this struggle to have the active support of prominent women of Britain's Left — women like Doreen Massey, Hilary Wainwright, Lynne Segal, Sheila Rowbotham and Anna Coote — all of whom have, like the Communist Party, maintained a respectful distance from this particular struggle.