

Report of Public Event in Harlesden, London, 13th September, 1975

by Stephanie Lee and Bonita Lawrence

The Power of Women Collective has ~~existed for two years now. From the time~~ it was formed, when Wages for Housework was presented to the Women's Liberation movement as THE perspective for feminist struggle, the perspective was discussed, and developed. There was immediately conflict between us and women in the Women's Liberation Movement who wanted 'equality' with men, who saw men as THE Enemy, who thought liberation for women meant taking on a second job, or who thought we could only engage in local struggles or struggle around specific 'issues'. These tendencies operated within our own collective for a long time, and effectively prevented us from immediately launching a campaign for the wage. Our energies were devoted to creating instruments which went to build an international network - pamphlets, a journal, and now an anthology. While members of our collective have been instrumental in getting the campaign off the ground in other countries, we have used the power of the movement in other countries to get our campaign off the ground. In important ways, we have only begun to find our own base here, now that we have hit the streets. A member of our group said that we would not know what Wages for Housework was really all about until we went into the streets with it. This has been the absolute truth - as we move out among more women, our power is increasingly greater, and we are on the move to get the wage.

To reach women in London, it is not enough to plan a demonstration through the centre of the city. London is a series of small towns clustered around the great empty core of Westminster, with its houses of parliament and tourist traps. We women spend our entire lives in our areas. There is not enough time to travel all over the city, we have too much work. It is also too expensive. We stay in our areas, which are crowded, impersonal streets, with no places for people to meet each other. When we planned the Harlesden event we had just had a great deal of coverage in the media. We realized that we must make our presence felt in the flesh, and on the spot, where women could see who we were and could talk to us. We chose Harlesden as the place to stage an event, in front of a church on the High Street, where women would be doing their shopping. Harlesden was ideal in many ways. First, since a lot of us live and work in that area, we have connections there. We gave leaflets to local women's groups of every kind - social 'mums groups', single parents groups, a nurseries action group, pensioners and womens centres, and some of these themselves took leaflets to distribute in that area, waged jobs, bingo halls, etc. The area itself has many factories which employ mostly women - and many of them are now closing down, forcing women to compete for another job or survive without a wage. It is an area where many immigrants live - the streets, factories, and hospitals would be almost empty without the West Indian, Asian and Irish women working for cheap or for nothing. When we leafletted the factories, the hospital shifts, the housing estates, the shops, the laundries, the schools when mothers came to collect the children, we met the same women in different stages of their working day. The waged workplace and the unwaged workplace are side-by-side in Harlesden, and in both places our presence was seen and felt.

We leafletted madly for 2 weeks. We leafletted in the shopping area of Harlesden with a loudhailer all day Saturday, about 7 of us. The response of the women was very enthusiastic "I'll have some of that." What really impressed people was the fact that we were a presence to be reckoned with. We had a loudhailer - that was vital. It meant that we obviously had backing, that we are a campaign that want action - not just words, that we are planning to change our situations. It was the strength, the potential we showed that made women who would otherwise have said "what a load of rubbish!" stop, listen, and take our leaflet. Some asked suspiciously if it was socialist, and we always replied "No, its about women - it has nothing to do with political parties". Some compared us to the suffragettes. When men heckled us we answered them on the loudhailer and used the occasion to speak to specific comments people made. We talked about the £6 wage-rise limit recently imposed on the working class..."But how can we get a six pound wage rise when we don't get any wage at all..." All those leaflets given out, and hardly any at all thrown to the ground. We gave a woman the leaflet and she showed it to her husband and

confronted him with the words. The leaflet, a four page pamphlet, was printed in red and in black. It was pretty. It had a good, short presentation of Wages for Housework, news of the campaign, not too much print, with an insert giving details of the particular event. On the back was the address "To All Governments!" There was a picture, on the front, of women together--and it was the first leaflet, I think, that has ever had an Asian woman on the cover --they were so amazed that they would give it to their children to translate for them.

We planned to have a puppet show, some music, street theatre, a display, a bookstall, and speeches. For speeches, we decided to have several short (not more than 5 minutes) speeches about our situations. We wanted to make clear first that we were ordinary women fighting from the positions all women find themselves in, and second that the wages for housework campaign made it possible for us to bring our struggles together, under that banner and on that platform we found the courage and the opportunity - the power - to give voice to the struggles of the mother, the young woman, the waged worker, the lesbian, the immigrant, and nothing we said or demanded appeared unreasonable.

None of us had gone too far in developing other ways of speaking to women, but now we had to learn, and learn fast. Women do not read innumerable pamphlets (we have no time). The street theatre had already been made, and done beforehand in markets; so we brushed it up and got more people to do it--women who were not in the collective. The puppets were created by Priscilla Allen, who also wrote the script; the stage and the acting were provided by two drama students who were friends of some members of the collective. We borrowed the music--the guitarist from the Italian wages for housework network, and the music from the Toronto group. The participation of women who were not in the collective is very important. These women have been drawn into the campaign, because they want to work on it; further work will draw many more women in. All the visual effects were done by a women's group in Southampton. We learned that our campaign will grow as women bring their struggles together, and do concrete work together on the campaign.

We did the event twice -- once at 11 am and once at 3 pm. We arrived early to set up the rented public address system, and the display--our banner, a mobile, balloons, our "Bill for services", a big sign "We want wages from the government for every woman". We started the street theatre and singing to draw a crowd. Then the speeches began.

Suzie Fleming introduced us, and talked about the Family Allowance Campaign. She talked about the power women got in that struggle for money, and how that was a wages for housework struggle; which we are now continuing in a much more direct way.

Anne Oosthuizen spoke about herself and her work. She has been a student, a housewife, a teacher, a theatre director, and a mother. She talked about how no matter what her "job" was, she was a woman, always a housewife. She talked about how teaching is housework - training children for the labour force. She discussed the different teaching jobs, and the divisions between the shitwork teachers and the administrative-teachers. The ones who confront the rebellion of children every day, face-to-face are the lowest paid and have the lowest status because they are doing Women's work--be they male or female. The teachers who are paid most are the administrators who, she said "made sure other people did the work".

Stephanie Lee spoke next, as a young woman, legally defined as a child (under 16). She spoke about how children are wageless and dependant; how our mothers are in the same position--how we are trained for the labour force through school and the discipline of the family. This speech was an important one. In Britain today (and all over the world), children are refusing to work in schools, and also refusing to beg for more work when they leave school.

As people drifted on to do their shopping, Bonita Lawrence got up and sang the Wages Due song. That song is tremendous. We relied entirely on the songs from Toronto, because when we tried to get a group together, we discovered how small our resources were...we were still piecing songs together, desperately, in back of the church as we worked on props the morning of the event, and it was songs like the Wages Due song, which are so easy and powerful to sing, that made people stop, listen, stay, and enjoy! After the song, we had the Punch and Judy show, about inflation, which starts with Judy totting up her bill for her unpaid housework. The audience loved it, and more people stopped to watch.

Ruth Hall spoke about working for years in Harlesden factories. She talked about how women at Cheseborough-Ponds tried to get a union in, and how the Transport & General Workers Union collaborated with the management to squash the struggle. It was powerful. She spoke on how management divided the workers.. men against women, line against line, full-timers against part-timers, Asian and Irish and West Indian against English, young against old, etc, but how the women could have won the battle had they been able to organise as women, in the context of a wages for housework struggle, connected with the women outside, which the union had excluded. Her denunciation of the T.& G.W.U., the largest union in Britain, was a blow against union co-optation of our struggle. And nobody argued it--she had the proof. The audience knew all about the unions, women and immigrant men. They were very enthusiastic.

Anne Neale spoke next, as a waitress and a lesbian. She made a strong connection between the low-paid service work outside the home and the unpaid labour in the home, including sexual servicing. She talked about how she was refusing part of the sexual work, as a lesbian, but still had to put on her face and be a smiling machine everyday, because she is dependant on tips to survive; and how her boss gets all this labour out of her for £13 a week. This was the first time a woman stood up on a platform in Harlesden High Street and spoke about being lesbian. The strength of what we'd been doing was such that people saw Anne's struggle as part of all women's struggles. It went a long way towards breaking down the isolation of lesbians -- the isolation which is so necessary to keep lesbianism as a threat and a work discipline on straight women, and straight women a policing force on lesbians. The speech was well-received, in the understanding the women showed. Some smiled as they listened. Some seemed curious. None seemed hostile.

Solveig Francis spoke next, as a single housewife and a claimant. She talked about how much actual work is involved in collecting Social Security, how you get a tiny wage, are harassed by snooty inspectors, and are made to feel guilty about being alive. You are expected to be on call for any lousy job any time. For lack of money you cannot travel..."I can go to the railway station but I can't take a train anywhere." The home in which you are isolated becomes a prison. The responses to the speech were not negative though claimants are blamed for every problem we have by the capitalist media.

Selma James wrapped up the event. She spoke as a typist and the mother of a grown son. She began by saying that, although she has been in Britain for many years, she is still called a "foreigner". She said we all work to produce the wealth of the country and nobody who makes the wealth of the country is a foreigner. **AND NO WOMAN IS FOREIGN TO ANOTHER WOMAN.** We ALL belong here. She spoke on how women are forced to immigrate here or starve at home, and how we work here for low wages. Now that business is in a crisis we are being kicked out, immigrant and native. Many people stopped and stayed to listen to this speech. Selma said that when we demand abortions, and the right to choose to have children, we are demanding that they give us back our bodies which they have stolen from us. We want back not only the part of the body that makes babies but also the part of the body that types letters and scrubs floors. There are women in Harlesden who are Irish, who work together in factories, who are both Protestant and Catholic, and who are not allowing the State to divide them as they were divided at home, in Ireland. **THERE IS A WAR ON IN**

IRELAND, she shouted, and there are soldiers there. Those soldiers are our sons, our husbands, our fathers, and our brothers. WE DON'T WANT OUR CHILDREN TO BECOME SOLDIERS! This whole speech was amazing; people just LISTENING, very intently. We had presented our personal situations, and Selma's speech drew those situations to their conclusion. To conclude, she read the address "To All Governments".

The people were to a certain degree left hanging after Selma's speech. We sang the Wages Due song again, and broke for lunch. The whole show had lasted about 1½ hours. People wandered in and around to buy literature and talk. In the afternoon we did the show again, though at that time a lot of women had to be at home preparing the tea. Only the men have time to lounge around on a Saturday afternoon to listen to us! But there were enough women (not to mention strangely respectful and enthusiastic men) to make it worthwhile. That night, we had an enthusiastic, exhausted meeting about it, talked about all the responses we'd met, about the women we had to keep up contact with, and about contacting media about the event. We thought our speeches were a bit too long and we were also wondering what we could have done at the end, when people were standing around waiting for something more and might have been interested in establishing some further connection with the campaign. But we had taken names and addresses of women we had talked to, and since then we have been to see them and maintained contact. All in all, we were elated and floating!

The implications of a campaign which really goes to the streets with our experiences and our constant struggle and with a strategy and the power of an international movement can't be ignored. The women's movement has tried to work through centres and meetings -- setting up places to which "All Women are welcome" where we are supposed to be able to go and discuss freely our experiences and our politics, in an atmosphere of sisterhood and strength. The thing is, most women do not have the time to hang around women's centres. The politics of 'equality' are one of the important things which turn women off the women's liberation movement, but the methods of organising and meeting have been such that women who have children, husbands, two jobs (or even one!) have great difficulty getting involved with the women's movement, especially when we have to take care of other people. It is not enough to expect women to come to an office in the centre of London, when, not only are they too busy but when it is up to us, as women who are trying to organise our struggle, to go to each other and not to wait for the movement of women in rebellion to come to us. This has been one of the failings of the women's liberation movement. It has not given most women sufficient reason to get involved, and it has not given us the opportunity.

The 2 are connected: the women's liberation movement has not been in the streets organising around the fights we are each making where we are because it has had very little to say about these struggles and very little to do for them. Failing to attack what is fundamental to each situation and each struggle, it has not been able to make an organisational connection between them.

When we went onto the street, we were talking, singing, and acting not as a travelling piece of entertainment and not as a vanguard who could tell "the mass" what to do. We are of the masses and we recognise that we are all struggling--whether we are in an organisation or not. We are extending and strengthening our struggle by going to others who are not in our group. We, who have always been told that women can't do anything, in creating this event, have begun to show how much MORE we intend to do. We are already in every home. But we are losing in the situation, because of our isolation. We want to extend our struggle, by going to other women and being there frequently. Unless we have a presence in places where women are most of the time (e.g. in the streets, where we are attacked and whistled at and do our work and get arrested) we are (intentionally or not) setting up an isolated "vanguard" organisation. To refuse (or forget or not want) to take the struggle into the street is to refuse to work on the ground on which we stand.

-London, October 1975--Stephanie Lee and Bonita Lawrence