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REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE ON WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK AND WELFARE,
New York, April 24, 1976

The conference on Wages for Housework and Welfare sponsored by the New York Wages for Housework Committee in collaboration with a group of Black women for wages for housework which was held on April 24, 1976 in Brooklyn, New York was a landmark in the recent history of the women's movement in the USA. The conference brought together for the first time large numbers of Black and white women on the basis of our mutual interests while clearly recognizing the organizational autonomy of Black women in the struggle of all women for wages for housework. This reflects the power of the wages for housework strategy itself as a perspective based on the wagelessness that all women have in common which at the same time recognizes the specific situation of each sector of women and the particular power of each sector in our common struggle for the wage. The purpose of the conference was to launch the mobilization of women in New York City to struggle against the cuts in welfare and for wages for housework. The importance of this initiative in resisting the crisis which capital is trying to impose on workers not only in New York, a city of 8 million people, but throughout the US, cannot be underestimated.

Welfare is the first money that women have won directly from the government for the work that all women do in the home. During the 60's the massive welfare struggles across the nation led by Black welfare mothers succeeded in winning more money from the state and an end to some forms of bureaucratic harassment. Welfare is our first victory against dependence on the wages of men and therefore against the power that men have over us in the family as the primary wage earners. Welfare is also a victory in our struggle against having to take a second job outside the home in order to have money of our own, and against the limitation on the numbers of children we can afford to have which the state imposes through our dependence on the man's paycheck. Therefore the struggle to resist the cuts in welfare which the state is trying to impose through the crisis is a crucial step in building our power and autonomy as women in our struggle for wages for housework.

The state has always tried to turn welfare against us to control and divide women. The bureaucratic administration of welfare is itself such an assault on human dignity that women usually exhaust every other alternative before even going to the welfare office to apply for "public assistance". By keeping the amount of welfare money lower than the national minimum wage, the state tries to force women to get off welfare and accept low-paying jobs. Women whose children reach the age of 6 are required to

enter a job-training program called WIN (work incentive program). WIN acts as a work discipline against women by requiring us to report to the state on a routine basis for training for the hardest, dirtiest, and lowest-paid jobs. These jobs and the training program itself only mean more work for women in addition to our wageless housework. At the same time the amount of money given to welfare recipients is so low that workers are discouraged from leaving even the lowest-paid jobs to go on welfare.

The vast majority of welfare recipients in the USA are women. Women on welfare are either the heads of families, that is, women and their children with no man living in the home; disabled women; or older women. The largest of these categories are mothers with children and older women. In each case the amount of money a woman receives on welfare is barely adequate for subsistence. For example, in New York City (where welfare payments are the highest in the nation) a woman and three children receive \$394./month, as much as half of which must often be used just to pay rent, while an older woman receives a maximum of about \$200. per month. Older women who have never had a second job outside the home or, as in the case of women who were domestic workers, whose second jobs were not covered by social security (the federal pension plan), are ineligible for any retirement income from the government. Therefore their only possible source of income is welfare. Thus the unwaged work of women in the home during our youth determines our weakness also in old age: older women in the US have the lowest income of all sectors of the population.

The state's propaganda is that the money paid to women on welfare is income without work; thus the state denies that the reproduction of ourselves, children, and men is work. This propaganda depicts welfare mothers as "cheats" who are too lazy to work, and as prostitutes for having "illegitimate" children--that is, for having children while refusing dependency on the wages of men and the power of men over us in the home. Most significantly, through a regular campaign in the popular press attacking the high birth rate among Black welfare mothers, the concentration of the Black population in cities like New York which make the highest welfare payments, and suspected cases of "fraud" by Black women on welfare, the state relies primarily on racism to intensify its propoganda against welfare mothers. In these racist attacks on Black welfare mothers the state is attempting to defend itself on two fronts, seeking fundamentally to divide the working class against itself: first, by claiming that cuts in social services and wages in the cities are due to the "burden" on local budgets of what it calls "the welfare mess", and second, by placing the blame for the "welfare

mess" on Black women.

Most specifically, the state's attack on welfare mothers is designed to divide women against each other. By identifying welfare with Black women the state attempts to divide Black and white women. By denying that welfare mothers are working--that is, that the reproduction of themselves and their children is work, it attempts to divide "working women"--women who have a second job outside the home--from "welfare women". Further, the state uses women who work as social workers directly to police women who are on welfare. And finally, by identifying being a welfare mother with being a prostitute, the state seeks to maintain the division between wives and whores by which it has traditionally enforced its control over female sexuality and procreation.

Thus the attack by the state against women on welfare is an attack on all women: for in attempting to isolate and punish this particular sector of women, it seeks to punish all women and maintain us all in isolation--the isolation which is based on the unwaged work we all do in the home. For the "crime" of welfare mothers is that in demanding money directly from the state for the work they do as women, refusing both dependency on the wages of men and the power of men over us in the home, they have led the way for all women in our common struggle for the wage.

Capital's counterattack against welfare women is reflected most clearly in the crisis. Not only is the "reform" of welfare a central issue in the national presidential campaigns, in every state and every major city the state is reducing welfare payments and restructuring the system in order to make it even more difficult for women to survive on welfare. To cite only a few of the cuts in welfare:

- *Abolition of "special grants" for clothing for children going to school, furniture, and emergency needs and the enforcement of a system of "flat grants" (a fixed amount of money with no additional payments possible)

- *Elimination of thousands of women from the welfare rolls as "ineligible"

- *The US Department of Agriculture has taken away \$100 million from a program to provide milk and high protein food to pregnant women, nursing mothers, and infants.

- *President Ford has proposed the elimination of 5 million people from the Food Stamp program. (Food stamps are coupons which make it possible for women on welfare to buy food at a reduced price.)

Fundamentally, the current crisis has begun to eliminate the distinction between "working women" and "welfare women". For the closing of childcare facilities throughout cities like New York means that many women will have to stop working outside the home. Thus at the same time that capital is attacking the standard of living of women on welfare, women who have achieved some economic independence and power by working outside the home are also under attack: capital is trying to force them back into the isolation and dependency of the home. In addition, many social workers have already been fired as the state begins increasingly to computerize the welfare system under the pretext of being better able to detect "fraud". In reality, by computerizing the welfare system capital is attacking not only the relative economic independence of women who work as social workers, but the increasing refusal of these women to do the state's dirty work of policing other women. For the struggle of welfare mothers against interference in their lives by social workers has been a power for social workers to refuse their work and thus the basis for an effective collaboration between these two sectors of women against the state. Thus during the crisis it becomes more and more clear to all women that today's "working mother" is tomorrow's "welfare mother"--that is, that every mother is a working mother.

Finally, the state's counterattack nationally throughout the crisis has been a campaign of terror against Black welfare mothers through forced sterilization. Forced sterilization has increased 300% since July, 1970. The state is determined to terrorize and punish Black women for struggling to have children in spite of capital's needs while refusing dependency on the scarce wages of Black men to pay for them. In this struggle Black women have showed that all women are sterilized through the dependency on the wages of men which capital imposes, because without money of our own no woman is free to choose to have or not to have children. Most recently the Federal government has begun a policy of paying for "family planning" for welfare mothers only if they agree to be sterilized, but not if they seek abortions. Many states, including the state of New York, are attempting to implement the same policy. This makes it most clear that Black women's and all women's only power against sterilization is the struggle for the wage.

It is in this context that the conference in New York on Wages for Housework and Welfare was held. The conference marked the beginning of our mobilization to resist the cuts in welfare and a further escalation of the international campaign for wages for housework. For the only way to defend and extend the victory that women have already accomplished through welfare, is by intensifying our struggle for money directly from the state for all women. Thus

the central task of the conference in launching this phase of the Wages for Housework campaign was to attack the divisions by which capital has tried to keep welfare women, and all women, struggling in isolation; for in refusing the wagelessness which is the fundamental weakness of all women, every woman is a "welfare woman".

The structure of the conference reflected this attack. Women from all 4 boroughs of New York city (Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan) as well as from cities throughout the US--Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Newark--attended the conference. During the morning there was a panel of women in many different situations who are already active in the struggle for the wage: a formerly "wealthy" suburban housewife who had to go on welfare to support herself and her children when she divorced her husband; a university student who went on welfare when she became disabled; a social worker; a Black woman who is an unemployed university lecturer; and a woman from the NY Committee for Wages for Housework who talked about the international campaign. Each woman spoke of how the struggle for wages for housework is a power for her in her particular situation, and of how her situation is fundamentally the same as that of the welfare woman, with the same fundamental weakness of unwaged housework. In particular, the social worker spoke of how the state attempts to use her against other women, while the suburban housewife talked of how her "middle-class" status ended overnight when she left her husband. The Black woman talked about the application of the Wages for Housework perspective to the specific situation of Black women whose presence in America began with the wagelessness of slavery, and, in particular, about the state's counterattack against the wombs and the sexuality of Black welfare mothers today through forced sterilization.

Following the panel there was a "speak-out" in which women who attended the conference expressed themselves spontaneously at an open microphone. Lesbian mothers spoke of their greater vulnerability as mothers because of their lesbianism, of how they are fired from second jobs more quickly and of how the courts declare them "unfit" mothers and take their children away because of their refusal of the sexual work of fucking men. Many older women spoke of the entire cycle of wagelessness throughout their lives, of how their housework as "grandmothers" continues up to the grave, and of their particular isolation as "old" women whose age is itself considered a "disability" under capital. Many Black women spoke of the power relation between Black and white women under capital in which white women are defined as "ladies" and Black women as "whores". They spoke of the vast numbers of Black women whose only possible waged

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work outside the home is as maids for white women and of how Black women are the lowest-paid wage earners in the US. They spoke also of their struggles against the welfare bureaucracy, against the welfare cuts, and for more money for themselves and their children. Finally, a highlight of the "speak-out" was the statement of a young/woman who told how she had abandoned the so-called "feminist movement" for its rhetoric and lack of strategy, but that at this conference she knew she had found the real women's movement.

During the afternoon of the conference there were autonomous meetings of Black women, social workers, and other sectors of women who discussed among themselves how best to resist the cuts in welfare and struggle for the wage in their particular concrete situations. The organization of these meetings showed that our attack on the divisions among women does not mean a denial that these divisions exist but rather the recognition of the particular struggle and power that each sector of women in their specific situation brings to our common struggle for the wage. For destroying our isolation cannot mean obscuring our particular strengths.

After the autonomous meetings the entire conference reassembled. The Black women announced to the conference that they would continue from then on to meet as a group around wages for housework. There were many exciting proposals for further actions in our mobilization over the next few months against the cuts and for the wage. The proposals reflected the concrete knowledge of the relation of forces in our struggle based on the concrete experiences of the different sectors of women at the conference. The conference ended with a film made by the Wages for Housework Committee in London, showing the progress of the campaign in England and scenes from the women's strike in Iceland last fall which paralyzed the entire country. These scenes drew a standing ovation from all the women. We left the conference feeling powerful and confident that this summer in New York will be a summer of struggle by women against the cuts for wages for housework.

"Power to the sisters and therefore to the class internationally."

July 8, 1976
Brooklyn, New York