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France

Current difficulties of the feminist movement and the areas of united intervention

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We recall that our feminist intervention is intended to be carried by all of the LCR in all our different areas of activity and that the secretariat is there simply to give an impulse to and centralise the activity, etc. We will therefore describe the political context within which feminist activists have militated, our internal operation and in conclusion several reflections relating to the New Anticapitalist Party.

"Objective" difficulties of the situation

Since 2002 in particular, the feminist movement has had to confront some large obstacles: it has faced not only attacks faced by all workers but a real ideological offensive which had been going on since the 1980s in North America centred around the theme of respecting the "differences between the sexes" and the idea that you would have to re-balance the power relations between men and women, in order to correct the "excesses" of feminism. Psychologists in the media go on about the dangers which threaten a society which fails to differentiate between male and female behaviour, and an imagined seizure of power by women and mothers in particular. They all defend paternal authority. All methods are acceptable to legitimate this discourse of "difference".

Another sizeable facet of this ideological offensive: religion. The Catholic hierarchy has always emphasised the difference between male and female roles and the motherly vocation of women. Catholicism is not alone in holding this vision of the world, it is shared between all religious fundamentalisms.

The return of the religious to the fore will not lead to a greater liberation of women. On the international scene, these movements always fight against the right of women to control their own bodies. In the United States, where the anti-abortion movements are very strong, they have succeeded in challenging the right to abortion in several states.

Another anti-feminist offensive, led by intellectuals who call themselves feminists (Elizabeth Badinter, Marcela Iacub etc.): the fight of feminist organisations against violence against women is denounced by these latter as "victimist" (locking women into the logic of victimhood). For Badinter and others, there are on the one hand democratic countries where, men and women being equal, such violence is only ever a simple individual pathology or a banal conflict within couples; and on the other hand, there are patriarchal countries (all the non-Western countries) where systematic anti-woman violence exists. Unfortunately reality is more complex and violence of this sort also exists in the West and in all social classes.

-The political situation in France: contradictory messages

If the right which came into power on the 6th of May last year is incontestably the most reactionary we have known for decades, it is nevertheless following a well-developed pattern: the right finds it impossible to defend an explicitly sexist model. On the contrary, it talks a lot about the importance of equality between the sexes. It proclaims its desire to achieve parity in the government and has named women as important ministers (Michèle Alliot Marie for the Interior, Christine Lagarde for the Economy, Roselyne Bachelot for Health, Rachida Dati for Justice). These nominations are accompanied as well by posts in government for women from "visible minorities" (the term is questionable): Rachida Dati, Rama Yade, Fadela Amara... Despite the absence of a Ministry for the Rights of Woman, let alone a "minister responsible for equality at work and parity", the equality of the sexes is frequently presented as one of the government's priorities. This misleading integration of a feminist theme like equality at work recalls an old tactic of the Right: Giscard d'Estaing also named Françoise Giroud as Secretary for State for the

Conditions of Women. More recently, Villepin's government voted in March 2006 for a law against violence against women which granted several feminist demands but which is largely without substance (no perspective on prevention, no means of implementation, etc.). In the coming months, the government may try the same trick on feminist organisations as has been tried with the unions, green groups, social inclusion campaigns, etc.

The government is committed, following a conference on equality at work, to put an end to discrimination against women in the workplace by 2009. A year of more of the same sorts of targets as fixed under the Chirac presidency. All the anti-social measures, the attack on the reduction in working hours, the attack on employment contracts, the incessant advance of precarity and the increase in the required number of years of contributions to a pension fund are hitting women especially hard.

All these offensives are designed to sow a certain confusion in the ranks of a section of feminists. A confusion which we, through our activity, have attempted to dissipate, through our publications – cf. the issue of "Cahiers de Critique Communiste" on "Women, gender, feminism (femmes, genre, féminisme)" – and through participating in debates within different organisations or networks such as the CNDF, ATTAC, etc.

Unity Work:

Our continuing preoccupation is to construct as broad a network as possible in order to impose a balance of forces favourable to women's rights and radical, feminist change in society, in all sectors and all social groups. That is why the LCR intervenes in different unity structures and feminist organisations: the Collective for Women's Rights (CNDF), the Co-ordination of Associations for the Right to Abortion and Contraception (CADAC) the Global Women's March (MMF), Family Planning (MFPP), the ATTAC gender commission and more local organisations, particularly in the provinces. In the unity structures, we note a disengagement of organisations, parties and unions. For us it is fundamental to have structures which develop these questions.

CADAC has intervened on the charging of fees for contraception, on the medicinal use of contraceptives and more generally against the serious threats to the health system. The discussion on the unachieved right to do as one wishes with one's body (February 2007 colloquium) will be published in January 2008. CADAC is involved in supporting mobilisations in support of the right to abortion in Portugal, and in Poland, and is acting currently against challenges to abortion rights in Spain.

ATTAC's gender and globalisation is working on elaborations on different subjects (prostitution, the wage gap, pensions, etc.), enabling it to carry a feminist intervention into these spheres.

On the Global Women's March (MMF), we note that without initiative and mobilisation at a European or global level, the organisation is having difficulty acting as a co-ordinator. It is present in various unity initiatives but this presence amounts to only one or two people. Since 2005 the only real campaign it has run has been the one on prostitution during the Football World Cup, with debate on that topic being shut down with the end of the football competition. The real problem is to maintain European and international networks outside big campaigns, but this is the same problem as is faced by for example the European Social Forum

Thus we have an intervention in numerous structures and we have participated in several initiatives but alone, a small number of militants are working on this intervention, without sufficient communications between it and the wider organisation. More and more it is becoming difficult in certain towns (including Paris) to find or construct united groups to perform this intervention, or which are sufficiently open to non-organised or younger individuals who want to militate around feminist issues. During the last two years the campaigns have focused around violence against

women and the law, precarity and young children.

Campaign against violence against women:

Following a Spanish governmental vote on a law, the CNDF has had a long debate on this theme, which led to the publication in October 2006 of a law written by the CNDF and today taken up by parliamentarians. The law is centred on prevention and education against all violence against women and on support for victims and making contact with them. Since then there have been different initiatives to have this law passed: the demonstrations of the 25th of November, a debate in the Senate which opened with different interveners and a demonstration on the 24th of March 2007.

A petition is being circulated today demanding that the law be put on the parliamentary agenda, which was written by the PCF-Greens group. The aim of this law is to give coherence to the diverse legislation related to violence against women which exists and to effect certain improvements. Discussion around this law is still going on within feminist organisations.

The LCR took part from the start and participated in the writing of this law and also in its diffusion. It should be noted that there are traps to avoid around the question of violence, linked to the stigmatisation of poor areas [quartiers populaires], estates [cités – could also mean blocks of flats] and suburbs [banlieues] which the Right perpetrates: for the Right, violence against women only exists in these areas; furthermore, one must not fall into authoritarian, "security"-centred logic which the government developed, unchallenged by the celebrity organisers of the protests around the death of Marie Trintignant and the release of B. Canata from prison, protests which had no demands other than for a harsher sentence.

Campaigns on job insecurity and young children

In 2007 in two campaigns, the CNDF's job-security commission produced a very useful leaflet on this theme, and the public service commission produced one on young children. In parallel with the conferences organised around equality at work by Sarkozy, a demonstration had been organised and debate on this theme will continue following a colloquium on the 16th of February.

On the question of young children, the demands and perspectives of the CNDF, summed up in an excellent small pamphlet, are regularly used by different unity initiatives for the defence of public services. Elsewhere the LCR is taking up these proposals in its programme for the municipal elections, its militants having elaborated on them.

One can imagine the impact that all this work would have if it was taken up and reflected in all of our work!

Organisation of "internal" feminist work and its difficulties

Centralisation and co-ordination of feminist interventions

It is difficult for the secretariat to capitalise on the success of the CNF (National Commission for Formation) and to centralise and co-ordinate feminist intervention at the national level, in different cities and regions. There are also specific difficulties which might face local interventions (generation gap, difficulty with or absence of focuses for united intervention, etc.).

There is great difficulty in using the internet announce/discuss list, with no exchanges of experience or debates going on, and a total absence of responses to messages sent out.

Educationals and summer school

An important effort has been made in the area of education, in the context of renewing the course and recruitment of teachers.

Certain successes seem to be more broadly diffused within the organisation. But the education, especially at an elementary level, remains a priority during the coming period, especially as regards new activists. But equally the themes of the more advanced courses must be renewed.

Elementary Education

Pursuing the reorganisation of elementary education, transmission of educational activity between generations, diffusion of educational kits in regions, systematic education

– Education of "leaders": two-module intervention in TÃ´tes courses

– Summer school: a stream of "women" themed classes takes place every year trying to articulate the fundamentals of the oppression of women and debates around various themes. One of the recurrent difficulties is the women's rights section which should be integrated into all debates.

Operation of the secretariat and generational renewal

We have had successes in terms of new generations of militants but these are challenged today by a resignation. The women's secretariat today is not operating effectively enough to fulfil all the tasks of centralisation and speeding up of work.

Therefore we have had to stop the organisation of the Parisian regional commission (debates on various themes), which it will be necessary to take up again. It is thus necessary to find the means to engage in a new phase of recruiting a new generation of militants, all the more because that seems to correspond to the demands of a number of younger militants.

The national leadership

It is difficult to carry the themes of the feminist intervention into the national leadership (DN) and to organise the women-only session of the DN, to find it an objective (it must not become a place for discussion of feminist work which would therefore be ignored more in the plenary sessions). It has been suspended for a year, and will perhaps find a use today in particular on the question of the municipal elections.