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IN DEFENSE OF MARXIST FEMINISM

**Radical Women & Freedom Socialist
Party debate the International
Socialist Organization**



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The U.S. International Socialist Organization in Review: A Criticism of Fundamentals*

by Megan Cornish

With leftist literature tables and newspaper sellers cluttering the entryway to every antiwar event these days, one sometimes hears irate muttering to the effect of, “Why can’t you socialists get together? You’d be so much more effective if you did.”

Let me take the opportunity to answer that question both generally about socialists and specifically about the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) and International Socialist Organization (ISO).

Dividing line is history

The reason socialists don’t all get together is that we have fundamental differences over how revolutions are made and what, if anything, went wrong in the Soviet Union, the first country in the world to win a socialist revolution. Disagreements arise over the meaning of other historical events as well, from which we draw lessons for today.

For socialists, remembering the rich legacy of history is a revolutionary obligation. It is knowledge bought with workers’ blood. If we forget, others will make the same mistakes or be unable to repeat successes.

But a tremendous splintering of the Left has taken place as a result of this history, producing hardening of the arteries in many organizations. Too often, we don’t work together when we should. We demonstrate that we have not mastered the sad facts about the rise of fascism in Germany: the Nazis could never have won power if the Communist Party had made common cause with the social democrats to stop them.

* *Freedom Socialist*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (Oct.-Dec. 2002): 4. (<http://www.socialism.com/fsarticles/vol23no3/ISO.html>)

Trotskyist roots

The origin of ISO lies in the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, as is true for the FSP. However, the two groups left the parent organization at different times over very different issues. The tendency that would evolve into ISO broke with Leon Trotsky in the hyper-patriotic period just before World War II because it did not want to defend the Soviet Union.

FSP left in 1966 when the Socialist Workers Party, after years of battering by McCarthyism, proved unable to reach out to the Black civil rights movement, thwarted democracy within the party, and put down its own women leaders. FSP saw Black liberation as key to the U.S. revolution and stood for the front-burner status of women's rights, *before* the explosive 1970s rise of feminism.

USSR: workers state or capitalist state?

ISO and FSP have a basic difference over the nature of the Soviet Union.

The world-shattering accomplishment of the Bolshevik Revolution was the transformation of the Soviet economy from private to public ownership. Although the country was too economically backward to institute full socialism without help from revolutions in advanced capitalist countries, it was what Leon Trotsky called a workers state. Trotsky advocated unconditional defense of the USSR against imperialism while condemning the state bureaucracy that hardened after Lenin's death.

Poverty was the root cause of the bureaucratic *caste* that developed under Stalin to administer the distribution of scarce resources. These bureaucrats maintained political power through terror and enjoyed many privileges, but did not privately own industry.

According to ISO, however, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union became a new kind of ruling *class* called "state capitalist." They place all past and present workers states in this category.

The state-capitalist position has no objective basis, but relieves its proponents from having to defend workers states from attack by imperialist powers, an uncomfortable obligation during periods of demagogic flag-waving when the attacking nation is one's own.

Accordingly, ISO was "neutral" when counterrevolution overturned the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc workers states, seeming not to notice the *qualitative difference* as the return of capitalism wrought misery, starvation and war.

ISO condemns Cuba, too, as state capitalist. The organization does say that the Cuban revolution should be defended as a national liberation struggle, but does no defense work.

Sex and race matters

ISO supports equal legal rights for women and has marched for abortion rights. But they oppose feminism as bourgeois, and call socialist feminism — a concept invented by FSP's founders — a contradiction.

The dictionary defines feminism as "a doctrine advocating social, political, and economic rights for women equal to those of men." What could possibly be bourgeois and contrary to socialism in that?

The feminist movement is no more inherently bourgeois than any other liberation struggle, including the labor movement. Like the others, it is made up overwhelmingly of workers, but led by apologists for capitalism. And the job of revolutionaries is the same in all: to organize an independent, workingclass, radical opposition. FSP and Radical Women, the party's sister organization, do just that.

In fact, women's struggle for liberation is not intrinsically bourgeois but intrinsically revolutionary, because women can never achieve even the most basic equality under capitalism, a system that absolutely relies upon female subjugation.

The same goes for race liberation. ISO has a weak and limited analysis of the nature of the Black struggle and racial oppression generally, which the FSP believes are defining political issues.*

* ISO disputes the existence of white privilege and says racism gives white workers no economic benefits. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Civil Rights and Civil Wrongs: Racism in America Today," *International Socialist Review*, Issue 32 (Nov.-Dec. 2003), <http://www.isreview.org/issues/32/racism.shtml>. Featured on "What We Stand For" webpage, 28 Oct. 2008.

While ISO says “the specially oppressed groups within the working class suffer the most under capitalism,” it does not believe that they are the most militant part of the class. FSP believes that their leadership is essential to the socialist revolution in the U.S.

I remember discovering when I visited International Socialist meetings in the 1970s that although women, people of color and gays might attend, they were little represented in leadership. I find the same true today, and believe this reflects their thinking on the importance of these groups.

United front time

As far as I know, ISO has never advocated voting for a single socialist candidate. They also assert that “we do not support candidates of capitalist parties like the Democrats or the Republicans.” But ISO supported the second Ralph Nader presidential campaign, even though Nader is pro-capitalist and a redbaiter. What does this kind of flip-flop from electoral abstentionism to opportunism teach anyone about socialist politics?

Another contradiction: on paper, ISO agrees with Trotsky’s idea of *united fronts* — coalitions with workingclass programs in which organizations act together on issues they agree on, while frankly debating the areas where they differ. But while ISO is involved in mass-movement coalitions, it seldom works collaboratively with other leftists, and routinely speaks about itself as if it were the only socialist organization.

Well, it is time to get real. Imperialism is in a protracted economic crisis. The U.S. president has gathered unprecedented power and is abrogating civil liberties on a massive scale. In response, workers and youth internationally are fighting back. The Left, especially in the U.S., has a historic responsibility to curtail power plays and work together to build an openly radical wing in these movements. FSP is ready. Is ISO?

Debate with International Socialist Organization on the Draft and Feminism

The following e-mail discussion took place in April 2008 after Megan Cornish posted a FREEDOM SOCIALIST Soapbox column on the NW Students Antiwar Listserv on the topic “How can we revitalize the antiwar movement?” The article by Linda Averill critiqued organizations that wanted to “own” the antiwar movement and limit it to narrow, single-issue demands. Averill wrote that she had experienced similar problems in the 1980s in Committee Against Registration and the Draft (CARD), where one cause of debate was “whether the issue of sexism had a place on the anti-draft agenda.” In explaining the topic’s relevance, she noted that “women’s exclusion from the draft...is used to justify discrimination in other areas of life.” The article ended with a call to “put muscle in our antiwar effort by building an inclusive, democratic movement.”*

ISO representative Steve Leigh replied with a denunciation of Radical Women’s position on the issue of women and the draft. The discussion then broadened to a debate over ISO’s opposition to feminism.

From: Steve Leigh

To: NWstudentsantiwar

Subject: Re: How can We Revitalize the Antiwar Movement?

Hi,

Just a note on the analysis of CARD (Committee Against Registration and the Draft) in the ‘80s. The FSP as noted [in Averill’s column], took the “Feminist” position that “if there was a draft, women should be drafted.” This position was rightly rejected by virtually everyone else in the committee. Our view was that specially oppressed groups — women, Blacks, Gays etc. should be *raised* socially — i.e. have burdens lifted in order to bring them closer to

* Linda Averill, “Antiwar Déjà Vu,” *Freedom Socialist*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (April - May 2008): 11. (<http://www.socialism.com/fsarticles/vol29no2/soapbox29217.html>)

equality. Adding the burden of being forced into the military was not a step closer to equality, but a step away from it. We said the demand should be “No Draft” without it being compromised by a call for equal drafting of men and women if there is a draft.

In society today, women are still oppressed — suffer disproportionate sexual violence, are objectified, are paid less, bear disproportionate household burdens, face a “glass ceiling,” lack full reproductive freedom etc. etc. It is also true that women are imprisoned less, and live longer on average than men. Should “Feminists” demand that women be imprisoned at the same rate as men? How about demanding that women have as many heart attacks per capita as men? Most people would see such demands as ludicrous! — and rightly so. Instead, we should demand the abolition of prisons and the reduction of stress and better medical care for all.

The way to achieve equality is to raise everyone’s conditions to the highest level possible — not further reduce the conditions of oppressed groups — or of the working class generally. Most women who heard of “Feminists” demanding that they be subject to the draft would respond with “If that is what Feminism is, then I’m no Feminist!” The FSP’s position to the extent it had any influence weakened Feminism and the anti-draft movement. Besides being an anti-equality position, it was a position that would have strengthened the military by expanding the pool of people to draft. Some activists called this “Pentagon Feminism” and rightly so.

Unfortunately, this issue is not just of historical interest. Today, Liberals like Charles Rangel, N.Y. member of the House of Representatives, call for equalizing the burdens of all classes by imposing a draft. This would end up giving the military more of a pool to run its wars. It would also put a greater burden on poor and working people. Instead of being forced into the military by economics alone, they would be forced into the military by law as well. The rich, who Rangel claims to aim his draft at, would still find ways out of the military as they did in the ‘60s. Presumably, the FSP would expand this pool further by including women!

Instead of strengthening the military by calling for a draft, we should oppose the “poverty draft.” We should demand that the

government provide decently paid domestic jobs in health care, teaching, infrastructure repair, environmental restoration etc. — so people are not forced to join the military by economic pressure. This should be funded by taxes on the rich. Instead of having the burdens of the rich raised by being drafted as Rangel wants, their burdens should be raised by taxing them to provide for the real needs of society. This would also weaken the power of the military.

Steve Leigh,
International Socialist Organization

From: Megan Cornish
To: NWstudentsantiwar
Subject: Should Women be Drafted if Men Are?

Steve,

Your response hardly conveys the depth of Radical Women’s position on women and the draft. Below I’m posting an article we published in the *Freedom Socialist* newspaper in 1980 on the subject. Your statement that Radical Women’s position (which you attribute to FSP) weakened feminism and the anti-draft movement seems insincere at best, since ISO opposes feminism as inherently bourgeois.

Meanwhile, I find it interesting that you had nothing to say on the subject of the left working together cooperatively to build the antiwar movement instead of many groups, entrenched in sectarianism, trying to “own” it.

Megan Cornish

Women and the Draft*
by Constance Scott

A bitter national controversy has once again erupted over the draft. Many of the same people who demonstrated against the Vietnam War are back in the streets, chanting “Hell, no, we

* *Freedom Socialist*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 8.

still won't go!" What is new in the uproar is the emergence of the woman question at center stage.

While the antiwar movement and the New Left of the '60s were withering away, feminism flourished, and it spread into a social force with such an enormous impact that President Carter, intent on resurrecting involuntary conscription, could not ignore the issue of drafting women.

As a result, an intense debate on the advisability of drafting women is raging on every level of the political spectrum, and it is crucial for feminists and the radical left to understand the full, complex dimensions of the subject.

The born-again draft

In his State of the Union address to Congress in January, Carter sought congressional approval for a record \$158 billion military budget. He took the occasion to warn the Soviet Union that the U.S. would intervene in the Persian Gulf if the economic and political interests of American imperialism were endangered. And to bolster this threat, he called for an end to the all-volunteer army and for a reconstitution of Selective Service to register men for the draft.

One month later, in February, Carter asked Congress for the authority to also register women.

Yeas and nays

Within hours of Carter's address, antiwar demonstrators hit the streets nationwide to protest revival of the draft. University of Oregon women carried signs proclaiming "Hell, no, we won't go...and neither will our boy friends!"

The opposition to the draft was loud and clear. But what about women's role in the military if the draft is restored?

NOW president Eleanor Smeal said that she opposed the draft for anyone, but if men were required to register, women should be, too. "We are full citizens," she said. "We should serve in every way."

Countering her was anti-ERA ring leader Phyllis Schlafly, quick to denounce Carter's plan as "a cowardly surrender to women's lib...we are not going to send our daughters to do a

man's job."

Most of the left is deftly sidestepping the issue.

Workers World says that drafting women is "ironic and hypocritical" without a national ERA. *Workers World* opposes the draft for men and women, ignoring the question of what to do should it be reinstated.

The *Militant* is antidraft in general and opposed to drafting women in particular. Candidate for vice president Matilde Zimmerman writes that drafting women will "undercut popular support" for the ERA! "We are for equal rights for all, not equal oppression," she says.

The *Guardian* sees the question as secondary, fearing that the controversy is "so extreme it could potentially overshadow the more fundamental debate over registration and the draft."

Carter, meanwhile, pretends to be pro-ERA and tries to win feminist support for the draft with a demagogic appeal for equity. "Equal obligations," says this great emancipator of women, "deserve equal rights." But behind Carter's smooth phrases lie his usual doublethink.

Women as non-combatants

Scrambling to please his conservative supporters, Carter has vowed that female draftees will be excluded from combat duties.

But many of the 150,000 women already in the service have long complained that combat restrictions prevent them from entering 75% of the positions in the service, leaving them with little opportunity for training or promotion. Once again, women are relegated to low-status, dead-end jobs: 80% of the women are pushed into the four lowest pay grades.

Even when a woman in a combat area is doing the identical work as a combat-classified man, she is called non-combatant and paid less because of the restriction.

So Carter's proposal is simply a way for the Defense Department to double its supply of cheap involuntary labor.

Up in arms over volunteers

Women already comprise 8% of the total volunteer armed forces—a higher percentage than in any other country. And this

doesn't seem to bother the brass.

But the Pentagon and congressional hawks shudder at the fact that Blacks now comprise 34% of all new recruits to the 5 million-strong army — and will soon represent 65% of the non-commissioned officers.

The militarists rightfully fear that an army composed of so many Black troops and officers may well refuse to squash revolutions in Third World countries or smash insurrection at home.

Behind the move for a new draft, then, is military and government anxiety to beef up the armed forces with more pliable, privileged and patriotic white men to alter the present racial ratio and diffuse potential resistance from the Blacks.

And quiet as it's kept, the generals also fear a massive influx of females into the services, despite the great record of women as clerical aides, drivers, and administrators in the military. Drafted, non-volunteer women may well oppose military repression of their sisters in Iran and around the world; drafted women, of all races, could prove to be an even graver internal security threat than Black men.

So military planners are disinclined to neutralize the effect of Black troops only to open the combat doors to rebellious, critical women.

A males-only draft is sexist

Imperialist wars are wrong. The draft is wrong. But many feminists and radicals have come to see that deliberate exclusion from the draft on sexist grounds is nothing less than rampant discrimination.

Chivalrous rightwingers and rabid antifeminists notwithstanding, fighting has always been women's work!

Throughout history, women have been capable and courageous warriors in the struggle for self-defense and freedom, as witness their role in the Arab revolution, Nicaragua, Iran, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, the Russian, French and American revolutions, the World War II underground, and so on.

To exempt women because of "fragility," "weakness" and propensity to pregnancy is flagrant perpetuation of women's

second-class status, not homage to the "gentle sex."

Similarly, witchhunts against lesbians and gays in the military — designed to sustain the myth that homosexuals are morally and mentally incapable of military service — are examples of illegal discrimination that must be challenged.

Feminists, lesbians and gays, workers, radicals and all who oppose the draft and the imperialist war machine must nevertheless be prepared to fight exclusionary policies in the armed forces based on male chauvinism and homophobia.

The last antiwar movement was rife with sexism and heterosexism largely because of women's freedom from the draft, just as the labor movement was rent with prejudice to the degree that women, minorities, and gays were absent from it.

Women and draft resistance

The new draft opposition is building even before mandatory registration has been invoked. And women are already moving to the fore of this antiwar movement of the '80s.

Women — especially women of color and lesbians — need to fight on a two-edged front. They must be in the vanguard of political resistance to the draft and to capitalist war, and they must fight sexist rejection from the draft, should it be realized.

Along with revolutionary opposition to war mobilization, women radicals, like male radicals in previous wars, must be prepared to join their class brothers and sisters in the armed services — to go where the male workers and minority males are and share the burdens and pressures together.

In this way, well-trained female soldiers can truly lead in turning the imperialist war into a civil war of worker-soldiers against the capitalist warmongers, as was done so brilliantly in Portugal.

The primary struggle at this juncture is against reinstatement of the draft. But if it happens, equity demands that it comprise both sexes and all sexual orientations. Then women and sexual minorities will take their place as true equals in the draft resistance movement, inside or outside the military.

Women as a whole must have the same options as men, the

same choices of being inducted, going to jail, fleeing the country, etc. The exact tactic will be determined by the actual strength of the war resistance movement at any given point, but women are obligated to face equal alternatives.

Nor should women horsetrade the ERA for the draft. To proclaim “No draft for women unless ERA is passed,” begs the question with a legal technicality. Black slaves escaped to join Union armies long before the Emancipation Proclamation precisely because they realized they had to win freedom with their own blood. Rarely is there any other way.

In World War II, Black troops won an end to segregated units and entrenched military racism, and came home to lead the civil rights struggle here. As did Japanese Americans, who joined the army to escape internment and fight racism in the military as well as at home.

The woman who becomes a coal-miner or a bus driver has decided that equal exploitation is superior to her previous “privilege” as unpaid domestic or underpaid clerical-service labor. This woman does not evince her hostility to wage exploitation by staying clear of the working class — she joins it, becomes part of it and of its struggle.

And so with the military question: women oppose the war machine not only by condemning it from the relative safety of far-off perches, but by resisting it from the inside, shoulder-to-shoulder and rifle-to-rifle with their oppressed sisters and brothers — or from the outside as draft resisters.

From: Steve Leigh
To: NWstudentsantiwar
Subject: Re: Should Women be Drafted if Men Are?

Hi,

[Constance Scott’s] article may be more “in depth” but takes the same basic line as the previous one. The only major addition is the claim that excluding women from the draft is based on sexist assumptions about women being unable to fight. Of course sex-

ist assumptions must always be fought, but it doesn’t follow that subjecting women to a new oppressive condition is the way to fight that assumption. Of course every revolution has included large numbers of female fighters. The issue is not “Can or should women fight?” The issue is “should they be legally forced to fight for U.S. Imperialism if men are as well?”

There is also a huge distinction between equal access to military positions that women volunteer for and being forced into joining something they would otherwise not want to join. Of course women should be treated equally in their access to military jobs, just as they should to jobs with the police, the mafia or any other nasty institution. The same logic means that we support full equality for Gays in the military and oppose “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” etc. This is *not* the same as saying Gays or women should be “equally” coerced into serving in these institutions.

One other argument in the article is that women can most effectively be involved in the antiwar movement if they are subjected to the draft if men are. Not necessarily so! In ’60s, many people not subject to the draft were involved in the antiwar movement: women, open gays, people with physical problems, those with student deferments, older people etc. It was in the interest of the vast majority of people to oppose the imperialist war on Vietnam and as time went on, more and more did. It is entirely possible for people to oppose a form of oppression that they themselves are not directly subject to — especially when that form of oppression reinforces other oppressive conditions that do impact them. This argument is similar to the argument below on Women’s Liberation and Feminism.

As far as the I.S.O.’s position on Feminism: We take the same position as Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Zetkin, Kollontai etc. — i.e. the classical Marxist position: There can be no socialism without the liberation of women. The working class cannot win its liberation while half of it (i.e. women) is still oppressed. Socialists have an obligation to fight for the full equality and liberation of women before, during and after a socialist revolution. The fight for women’s liberation begins now and is not just a question for “af-

ter the revolution.” Just as importantly, there can be no full liberation of women under capitalism. It can only be fully achieved in a socialist society. Women’s Liberation and Socialism are ultimately part of the same struggle and depend on each other.

This is why the I.S.O. along with the Marxist tradition rejects the idea that Women’s Liberation is a *separate* struggle, to be taken up by a separate Feminist movement. All workers – female and male – have an interest in fighting for Women’s Liberation. Steps toward equality of any specially oppressed group help to create the basis of stronger unity in the working class and make united, effective struggle more likely, even under capitalism. The fight for women’s liberation (and against racism, anti-gay bigotry, anti-immigrant nationalism etc.) needs to be integrated into the fight against exploitation and integrated in the fight against capitalism.

Of course any oppressed group has the right to form separate organizations, movements etc. Everyone should defend that right. But defending a right to separate is not the same as *advocating* separation. The fight for women’s liberation will be stronger if it is supported by men as well as women. The goal should be to form integrated struggles for women’s liberation, against racism etc. – not to glorify separatism. Separatism is ultimately a weaker strategy against oppression. The I.S.O. has and will continue to support struggles against oppression, no matter whether those struggles are organized by Feminists, Black Nationalists etc. or not. However, while supporting those struggles, we will stress strategies and tactics that broaden the support and involvement of all workers and progressive people, instead of assuming that only women are concerned with sexism, or that only people of color are concerned about racism.

We do not call ourselves “Feminists” because Feminism implies that the fundamental division is between men and women and that therefore women must organize separately to confront sexism. Instead, we believe that the most fundamental divide in society is class. On one side of that divide is all who would benefit from the abolition of sexism, racism, gay oppression etc. – that is the working class. On the other side of that division is the ruling

class which benefits from institutionalized racism, sexism and anti-gay bigotry. (By the way, even Black and Female members of the ruling class benefit from racism and sexism. Condoleezza Rice is a good example.) We are Marxists and therefore Women’s Liberationists, but since we are not separatists, we are not “Feminists.”

As far as the I.S.O.’s views on building a stronger antiwar movement, I invite anyone to look at our newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, which week in and week out contains our views on the war, and how to build a stronger antiwar movement. See socialistworker.org.

Steve Leigh

From: Megan Cornish
To: NWstudentsantiwar
Subject: Re: Should Women be Drafted if Men Are?

Steve,

Your memory of the ’60s is selective. I and other women were told repeatedly that we should play strictly support roles but not have a voice because we weren’t subject to the draft and therefore “weren’t involved.” This was the excuse widely used in the movement for its extreme sexism and denigration of women. It was one of the main sparks that ignited the women’s liberation (sorry, but that’s just another word for feminist) movement. Several years before I found Radical Women and was delighted that they shared my view, I took the position that I should be subject to the draft and would resist it like the antiwar men my age.

The fact of the matter is that the exclusion of women from the draft is based on the theory of our inferiority. If you embrace that exclusion, you are accepting the logic that underlies it, no matter what you say to the contrary. This theory of inferiority is used to exclude women from combat, which in Iraq is a cruel joke that means women are just as much under fire, but don’t get the pay or promotion opportunities. It’s also used throughout society at large.

Also, a position against women being subject to the old-style

draft has no effect on the poverty draft. For more on women in the military today, see the *Freedom Socialist* article "GI Jane in the U.S. War Machine."*

You also don't address the point raised in Linda's Soapbox column that the issue of sexism was considered "divisive" by many left groups such as the SWP. What is your and ISO's stand on this question?

Feminism does not "imply that the fundamental division is between men and women." It is purely and simply the movement for the full equality of women in society. Look it up in the dictionary! Only a minority of the movement ever saw men as the problem rather than the system as the problem. Both men and women can be feminists, as are millions of feminist workingclass men, and the men of the Freedom Socialist Party, which as you know is a socialist feminist party.

And autonomous organizing is not necessarily separatist. Radical Women, for instance, exists to build women's leadership and to focus on women's issues that are all too often given little attention outside the feminist movement. Just because it is a women's organization does not make it separatist.

Your argument that anti-feminism is classical Marxism has been answered many times in the *Freedom Socialist*. It's a convenient position for those on the left who dismiss women's issues, demands and leadership in practice...

I think a public debate between Radical Women and ISO on these issues would be invigorating and informative. What do you say?

Megan Cornish

* Anne Slater, "GI Jane in the U.S. War Machine," *Freedom Socialist*, Vol. 26, no. 5 (Oct. - Nov. 2005): 7. (<http://www.socialism.com/fsarticles/vol26no5/GI%20Jane.html>.)

Antiwar Déjà Vu, Round Two: The ISO v. Feminism*

by Linda Averill

In the last *Freedom Socialist*, I wrote about sectarianism and single-issueism killing the antiwar movement. I cited a struggle from more than 25 years ago in the Coalition Against Registration and the Draft (CARD), where socialists and other leftists displayed arrogance and movement-defeating behavior, because they would not acknowledge the different experiences and levels of oppression faced by women in society, including the U.S. military.

President Jimmy Carter was attempting to restore the draft and Congress was debating whether women were competent to be included. Congress, the right wing, and the U.S. Supreme Court all said that women were simply *unfit* for the trenches.

I and other female opponents of the draft said that the only argument for women's exclusion was the sexism that is used to justify discrimination in other areas of life. For this, we were labeled divisive by many men in the coalition who wanted to ignore this front-page debate for fear it would "overshadow" the issue of the draft. International Socialist Organization (ISO) and others in the alphabet soup of the U.S. Left just didn't get it that sexism, racism and homophobia are what divides the workingclass — and must be answered whenever they occur. By siding with the misogynists on women's exclusion from the draft, these leftists were aiding the divide-and-conquer game.

In 25 years, ISO has not changed one iota. The group is still stuck in a sexist rut, arguing that feminism — the struggle for women's equality — is bourgeois and separate from the struggle to end class exploitation.

All this is regurgitated in a very long "note" on the NW Students Antiwar Listserve by ISO member Steve Leigh in reply to my

* *Freedom Socialist*, Vol. 29, no. 3 (June - July 2008): 11. (<http://www.socialism.com/fsarticles/vol29no2/soapbox29217.html>)

last column.

Here is a sample of ISO's contorted logic: "We are Marxists and therefore Women's Liberationists, but since we are not separatists, we are not 'Feminists.'" "Huh?"

Leigh continues: "The goal should be to form integrated struggles for women's liberation, not to glorify separatism."

With the stroke of a computer key, Leigh airily paints the entire women's movement with the broad brush of separatism. He ignores, or doesn't care to learn about the ideological and class divisions that characterize this movement. Betty Friedan and Audre Lorde and Andrea Dworkin, Code Pink and Fund for the Feminist Majority and Radical Women. All are the same! Why would ISO show such disinterest and ignorance of a struggle that concerns the fate of at least half the workingclass? It is embarrassing to read.

From ISO's viewpoint, women are damned if we do and damned if we don't. Ask the antidraft movement to oppose sexist arguments for women's exclusion and we are "Pentagon Feminists." Or dividers and distractors from the "main" issue. What's their main issue? *Always* something or someone ahead of the women in line.

Oh, and leftist women shouldn't take their concerns outside the socialist movement, either! That's divisive, they say. By silencing opposition to male chauvinism, this position holds back progress toward social change. It leads women to retreat to the conservative haven of separatism, the *opposite* of Radical Women's position.

When I first ran into socialists in the antiwar movement, I was struck by the sexism of groups like ISO. But thank Karl Marx and Clara Zetkin for the socialist feminists I met who *connected* the oppression of women as wives, soldiers, mothers and sisters – to racism and class oppression, to capitalism and the wars it inevitably produces. Their explanations were so logical. They made sense of the reality I experienced, and offered a cohesive strategy to fight back. It transformed me into an unrepentant socialist – and feminist. I wonder how many women the ISO has driven away from Marxism by mangling Marx's ideas.

Whoever coined the profound South African proverb, "You

strike a woman, you strike a rock," understood that women are great fighters, organizers, resisters, leaders of the oppressed – and revolutionaries. Our second-class status propels us to identify and unite with other downtrodden groups. Our hidden herstory is replete with stories of valor in battle – fighting tyranny, demanding justice. So rather than deny our abilities as fighters, let's unleash the strength of women as opponents of war and draft resisters!

Hope springs eternal. Maybe ISO and other leftists will listen up on the Woman Question and learn. But if 25 years haven't done it, I ain't gonna hold my breath.

You don't have to either. Don't suffer silently in the ranks of radical sexists. Socialist feminism lives. Women and men come one, come all!

Book Review

ISO: Taking the Feminism Out of Women's Liberation*

by Toni Mendicino

The International Socialist Organization's collection of articles by Sharon Smith, *Women and Socialism* (Haymarket Press, 2005), left me feeling like I'd been suckered by a slick internet dating service — stuck with something far different than the personal ad I answered.

Smith's book talks up women's liberation in an attempt to appeal to young people interested in feminism. But this turns out to be merely opportunistic, as Smith and ISO actually *reject* feminism. Their theory and practice deny the centrality of female exploitation under capitalism and ultimately dismiss women's oppression as a catalyst for revolutionary change.

Bait and switch

Smith's essays are confusing until you realize that the ISO thinks feminism — as an autonomous movement for the political, economic and social equality of women — is incompatible with the struggle to end class exploitation. (Feminism is, in a word, bourgeois.)

This tired canard would have horrified Karl Marx and his co-thinker Frederick Engels, as well as other revolutionaries Smith name-drops while mangling their theoretical contributions to the Woman Question. *Feminism* doesn't divide the working class — sexism does, as do racism and homophobia.

Smith also attempts to justify her anti-feminism by conflating the politics of *Ms.* magazine media stars with the entire women's

* *Freedom Socialist*, Vol. 27, no. 1 (Feb. - Mar. 2006): 6. (<http://www.socialism.com/fsarticles/vol27no1/bookreview.html>)

movement. In "What Ever Happened to Feminism?" Smith cites Gloria Steinem's turn to self-help psychology and the pro-business, anti-choice rants of Naomi Wolf as reason to throw the baby out with the bath water.

She writes, "Occasional lip service aside, mainstream feminism has never sought to represent any other class of women than the upper-middle class. ... That is why socialists have traditionally argued that feminism, as a solution to women's oppression, offers nothing to working-class women." With breathtaking arrogance, Smith ignores the class divisions among feminists and dismisses all the working women and men, people of color, riot grrls, lesbians, and radicals in the feminist movement. (And never mind that most women are, in fact, workers!)

Smith never acknowledges the existence of male privilege. She gives the barest nod to racism, ageism, heterosexism and other forms of oppression that afflict women. She spends more time berating liberals for supporting a French ban on Muslim head scarves than discussing the brutal realities of racism and the rise of misogynist theocrats at home and abroad.

In her chapter "Abortion Rights," Smith recognizes the need for reproductive freedoms that go beyond the crucial need for abortion. But this positive position is contradicted by ISO in practice. In the Bay Area Coalition for Our Reproductive Rights in San Francisco, for example, ISO members recently staged a failed sectarian power grab in which they argued *against* adopting a broad, multi-issue program and including issues of women of color in coalition literature.

Revolutionary feminism: no contradiction

Contrary to what Smith would have readers believe, not *all* Marxists see a conflict between feminism and class struggle. The Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women are pioneering *socialist feminist* organizations that see sexism, racism, anti-immigrant bigotry, and other divisive "isms" as top priority *class* issues.

As FSP and RW co-founder Clara Fraser explained in her book, *Revolution, She Wrote*, "If you're doubly exploited or triply op-

pressed, if you're in quadruple jeopardy...you've got that many more reasons to go out and hit the system." RW and FSP consider feminism a basic issue of democratic rights *and* a key theoretical question.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels details the fundamental *interconnections* of class and gender oppression. He documents how women's second-class citizenship resulted originally from replacement of communal ownership by private property and of female-reckoned descent by patriarchy.

What Engels calls the "world historical defeat of the female sex" was *indispensable* to the rise of the private property system, and it remains indispensable to capitalism today. Capitalism cannot accommodate women's liberation and survive, period. This means that the fight for female liberation is *inherently revolutionary* – and leftists who don't get this are doomed, in the end, to irrelevancy.

The Radical Women Manifesto lays out the difference between a revolutionary feminist program and the ISO's slippery and backward position on women: "'Unity' that does not respect the different experiences and levels of oppression within society is arrogant, false and eventually self-defeating. ...The oppression of women is a political, legal and economic question of first priority. Women's political leadership is decisive to the outcome of all the separate movements, and accordingly, we are destined to play a vanguard part in the general movement for revolutionary social change."

Order the book or check out more about socialist feminism at www.RadicalWomen.org – you may just find the match you've been looking for.

The Freedom Socialist Party

is a revolutionary, Trotskyist feminist organization, dedicated to the replacement of capitalist rule by a genuine workers' democracy that will guarantee full economic, social, political, and legal equality to women, people of color, queers, and all who are exploited, oppressed, and repelled by the profit system and its offshoot – imperialism.

For more information, visit www.socialism.com or contact the FSP National Office, 4710 University Way NE, #100, Seattle, WA 98105 (206)985-4621 • fspnatl@igc.org



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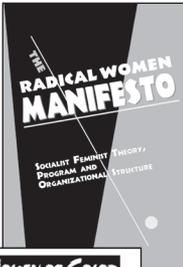
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RW is a trailblazing socialist feminist organization. It's the revolutionary wing of the women's movement and a strong feminist voice within the Left. Immersed in the daily fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, and labor exploitation, Radical Women views women's leadership as decisive to global change.

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