

Toronto Collective Statement

We agree with the importance Wages for Students has given in its recent discussions to the question of power relations within the working class. For us, it is the central strategic question which underlies how one sees the development of the power of the class as a whole and the process of the unification of the class, as well as the organizational forms through which they develop. It was differences on this central question which led to the split in the Struggle Against Work Collective (SAWC), despite broad areas of agreement on a general understanding of the working class struggle and the present crisis which sharply distinguished SAWC politics from the left.

We welcome a discussion with you on these questions, not least because you are discussing them within an organization in which blacks, women and white men are seeking to define a common basis to struggle for more power as students. At the same time, we want to make clear that in this letter we are trying to come to grips with power relations from our own position within the class as white male workers (whether we are presently waged or wageless). This is important to know in order to situate our remarks. While we are very clear that the autonomous struggles of blacks and women have been a source of increased power for us, they have also led us to some confusion about our own struggle for more power and how it relates to the struggles of less powerful sections of the class. The points we develop in the letter reflect our attempts to deal with our confusion specifically as white male workers. However, our attempts have not occurred in isolation from others sections of the class; in fact, the political and organizational experience of the Race Today Collective in England, and especially discussions SAWC and the Windsor auto workers' group had with Darcus H. last summer, have been a major source of clarification for us around these questions.

1. All of us in SAWC took *Sex, Race and Class* by Selma James as the starting point for coming to grips with the question of power relations within the class. The characterization of the working class as a hierarchy of power based on the wages different sections of the class have won from capital, with each level of the hierarchy exercising power not only against capital's command of their labour power but also over less powerful sections of the class, remains an important reference point for us in analyzing power relations. Also her analysis that these differences of power within the class are the basis for the need for autonomy from the more powerful sections that mass movements of blacks and women have asserted in the 1960's & 70's.

2. From this common starting point, however, two quite distinct and contradictory tendencies developed within SAWC, which expressed themselves in two related areas: (A) how power develops and circulates within and between different sections of the working class, and the relation between the autonomous struggles of less powerful sections and the struggles of the more powerful; and (B) the strategic and organizational perspective which flows from different positions on the above question.

(A) *Circulation of Power within the Working Class*

The first tendency, which we reject, sees the development and circulation of power within the class mechanically and undialectically, in that the growth of the power of the class as a whole, and of white male workers, is seen to be the result *only* of the development of the power of the less powerful sections of the class (to be more specific, of women) through their own autonomous struggles. In this view, power circulates only from the less powerful to the more powerful, never the other way around; The existing power of white male workers, and any struggle by us – for more power, is at best "neutral" or "given", though it is more likely to be negative, *at the expense of* the less powerful sections. The entire working class struggle and revolutionary process is thus reduced strategically to developing the power of the less powerful sections (read: women) through their own autonomous struggles.

This tendency not only abstracts itself from the whole experience of working class struggle historically and at present, including our own struggles as white male students and workers, but most crucially for us, it sees no positive role for white male workers' struggles except where they directly support the autonomous struggles of less powerful sections. This tendency leads to abdicating being part of the organization of struggles of our own section of the class in the name of the "higher" class interest of supporting the struggles of workers in less powerful sections. It leads to complete isolation (as SAWC was isolated) from the concrete struggles white male workers and all other workers are making to increase their power against capital.

Since the split in SAWC, we've been able to see the politics of this tendency in practice. The three men in this

tendency have formed into a group called "Men Against the Family Allowance Cutbacks" to solicit support from men for the Wages for Housework Committee's family allowance petition. They approach men not on the basis of the struggle they are making concretely as students, postal workers or auto workers, posing the concrete ways they can develop their power through these struggles and use this power to increase the power of the whole class; rather they approach them on the basis of an abstract affirmation that it is "in their interests" to support the family allowance petition.

We think it was this kind of politics which Mike Lefevre criticized so beautifully in his interview with Studs Terkel in *Working*: "I can't really hate the colored fella that's working with me all day. The black intellectual I got no respect for. The white intellectual I got no use for. I got no use for the black militant who's gonna scream 300 years of slavery to me while I'm busting my ass.... I have one answer for that guy: Go 'see Rockefeller. See Harriman. Don't bother me. We're in the same cotton field. So just don't bug me." (p. 6).

Our tendency takes the position that in the process of the struggles of different sections of the class for more power, the power of the class as a whole develops. While the autonomous struggles and perspectives of the less powerful sections (all of them, not women alone) are an ongoing reference point for white male workers, we maintain that the struggles of the more powerful have been, and can continue to be, a source of increased power for the less powerful sections. In most circumstances, our struggles and the struggles of other groups on the more powerful side of power relations within the class (e.g. parent/child; teachers/students) are a source of power for the less powerful *indirectly* just as we gain increased from the struggles of the less powerful indirectly, in that the direct objective of most struggles is more power for the group that's struggling. For example, the wages and power we win becomes the target for less powerful sections. In other circumstances, as the working class struggle develops, more direct forms of circulation of power are possible and necessary, but in all situations, workers in whatever section of the class they belong to, will move only when they see it increasing their power fairly directly and concretely. Workers are seldom liberals.

There are several examples we could use to be more concrete. The Quebec teachers' current struggles for wage parity with Ontario teachers and for decreased workloads is a case in point. In the last year, Quebec teachers have done a lot of propaganda especially vis-à-vis parents about the streaming function of the school system, about increasing class sizes and decreasing wages, and how all combine to have negative effects on students. After a prolonged period this winter and spring of work-to-rule campaigns and walkouts, the Quebec government passed a law prohibiting all forms of work stoppages and slowdowns, as well as prohibiting parents from withholding children from schools, which had developed to support the teachers. When the law passed, thousands of parents continued withholding their kids from school, and hundreds set up picket lines with students at schools to prevent the resumption of school. The point is that teachers were able to use their power and convince less powerful groups that they were so using their power, to struggle against the state's plan for students. The concrete mass support they received from parents and students indicates that they too saw the struggle as a source of power for them.

Closer to home, we think it's important for us to see how our struggle as young white refusers in the last ten years has been a source of power to women generally, and certainly to the specific women we have related to. It's no accident that the women's movement has been primarily a white women's movement. Part of that has to do with the fact that we have made struggles against capital's command of our lives that have won us the time and money and power which has made it less necessary to make the demands on women which our fathers did or which black men or immigrant men do. This is not to say our struggle was more important than women's struggle in this arena, but simply to assert that our struggle is a source of power for women. It's important to develop this if we are to avoid the politics of guilt in our relations with other sections of the class.

So for us it is essential to become fully part of the struggles of our own section of the class, and interact with other sections from that position, constantly posing the question at every stage of how our struggles can build the power of the whole class, as well as how the struggles of the less powerful sections build our power and that of the whole class. It is only on the basis of being part of the struggles of our own section that we can actively organize, concretely, for the use of white male workers' power to build the power of the whole class, rather than express the tendency to defend their power over less powerful sections. (Cf. "Black Wageless in Detroit", *Race Today*, Nov/75)

No one section of the class can express the experience or substitute itself for the struggle for more power of other section. Each section has strengths particular to it which are indispensable to overcoming the weaknesses particular

to other sections; no one section has all the strengths sufficient to build the power of the whole class. One of the important aspects of leadership within each section of the class is to be aware of your own section's strengths and weaknesses, in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of other sections and be able to relate that concretely to developing more power for the whole class. At different stages of the working class struggle, the strengths particular to different sections of the class are central to advancing the class as a whole; no one section is "the" leading section once and for all time.

To locate our own struggles as white male workers within this perspective on relations of power within the class, we have found it necessary to use the concept of *particularity* as well as the concept of *autonomy*. Autonomy is the need, based on differences of power within the class, for the less powerful sections to develop their struggle for more power independently of the more powerful sections (hence black autonomy, women's autonomy, students' autonomy from teachers' struggle etc.) Since we recognize that increased power for the less powerful sections means increased power for us also, we support the autonomy of less powerful sections of the class when they judge it necessary to advance their struggle. However, this principle, if applied mechanically by the more powerful sections before the less powerful themselves feel the power to move autonomously, can lead us to analyze ourselves out of existence, since there are no struggles we make without interacting directly or indirectly with women, blacks, etc. Thus moving on the basis of respect for autonomy does not mean the more powerful mechanically impose autonomy on other groups (e.g. in student struggles), nor does it exclude our taking organizational initiatives vis-à-vis less powerful sections in certain circumstances.

Whatever the form in which specific struggles are organized (autonomous, "mixed", etc) we stress the importance of being clear on the particularity of different sections of the class. By particularity we mean: (a) the position of different sections occupy in the hierarchy of power; (b) the particular way capital organizes the 24-hour working day of each section and (c) the particular strengths and weaknesses of different sections of the class which flow from our position in the hierarchy and division of labour. For example, white male workers in North America have had a longer experience than any other section of having their working day directly organized around *waged* work. Their struggle for more money and less work has forced capital to constantly re-organize and intensify their work to undermine the power their struggles have built up on the basis of the existing organization of production. Furthermore, white male workers have had the most experience with the phenomenon that organizations which are created in one stage of struggle and express that section's power (and, in certain circumstances, advance the power of the class as a whole) become their opposite at another stage, serving rather as capital's hand within the struggles of that section. We're thinking here of unions. The direct, day-to-day struggle, and history of struggle of white male workers, develops in this section a capacity for discipline and organization in struggle unparalleled by any other section. The situation of the auto worker, who faces not only the most developed forms of capital's organization of production but also the most developed form of the union as capital's hand within his struggle, is a case in point. On the other hand, sections of the class whose working day has not been mainly organized around *waged work* (e.g. women; the unemployed, where they have reached the stage of being a permanent section of the class – e.g. in U.S. or Caribbean), by making their struggle for more money and less work outside the framework of a stable, direct wage relation, tend to break the connection between wages and "productive" work, and show more sharply what waged workers have also established in fact – wages are the result of a power struggle between workers and capital, not an exchange for productivity. At the same time, the very fact that sections of the class whose work is not organized primarily around waged work have not had to develop the same discipline and organization in struggle has often led these sections to greatly overestimate their power as has happened with students and other sections also. The point is that without the particular strengths of different sections combining to make a stronger struggle, we in fact all overestimate our power and all end up weaker vis-à-vis the state.

So while "male autonomy" is a contradiction in terms (if by autonomy we mean the need of less powerful sections to struggle autonomously in defined circumstances from the more powerful sections), it is essential to maintain the particularity of white male workers and other sections in understanding and organizing our struggles. If we lose the particularity of white male workers, either in a "general" class perspective which sees the working class as a homogenous whole or by seeing only the less powerful sections as a source of power for the whole class, we fail in fact to grasp how the power of the working class develops and circulates. In our view, the politics of the first issue of Zero Work, despite many strengths, essentially tended towards a "general" class perspective because it did not use the concept of particularity as part of its analysis, while the men we split from in Toronto express the second tendency.

(B) Organizational Perspective

Many of the above remarks may seem quite abstract, especially when it comes to discussing organization. This abstractness is a direct reflection of how SAWC politics abstracted us from the concrete struggles of the working class, including our own organizational experiences as students, postal workers and auto workers. We are trying to overcome this difficulty by dealing with problems of organization in relation to concrete struggles and activities we see ourselves getting, involved in.

As such, we've been discussing how we see using the wages for school work perspective to interact with current student struggles. The response to the Wages for Schoolwork article already has given us something to go on. From the "average" U. of W. student, the response varies from "good idea" to "where will the money come from" to "pie in the sky" to the government already foots most of the education bill, it's unreasonable to ask for more". The common thread running through these comments was that while wages for schoolwork is perhaps a good idea, it is simply unrealizable at this time. In other words, people seemed to be saying that at this time, we didn't have the power to win. (Only one "non-political" student responded to the article in the feedback section of the newspaper. The other comments were sought out.)

The response from most of the student militants who are fairly sympathetic, to the perspective was surprisingly minimal. Part of the problem was the vehement and extremely traditional attack made on the article by the campus Maoists. This tended to create a spectacle effect, with my long piece being followed by equally long denunciations. Thus several student militants wrote letters to criticize the Maoists' dogmatism and only nominally to evaluate or develop the comments the article made. The other part of the problem was the "propaganda" orientation of the article. When pressed, many militants would ask – what do you do with this perspective? In other words, the article was able to uncover a lot about the present, relatively unorganized struggle against schoolwork, but did not analyze or advance concrete proposals about the present organized stage of the student struggle in Ontario, which is focused around impending large tuition increases. Thus the article came across as "interesting" propaganda. However, neither the mass of students nor ourselves thinks that consciousness, or the lack of it, is the problem; rather it's power – how much do we have with what, results, how can we organize to get more of it.

We have become clearer since the article was written that the propaganda approach, if not quickly superseded by analysis and concrete proposals regarding the present stage of the student struggle, can imply a particular way of interacting with student struggles that fails to grasp how power develops and circulates. One of the problems of our political tendency is the tendency to demand the sky, when at an actual given moment, we've only got the power to win a leaf. For example, the approach in the article might well have led us see organizing directly around the demand of wages for schoolwork, *parallel* rather than *within* the ongoing struggles of students at the present stage, telling ourselves (only we would listen!) that propagandizing the demand in and of itself "connected" and "circulated" the power of concrete student struggles.

Recent discussions have begun to clarify a different way of using the perspective. For us, it's important to become more actively involved the current struggle against the tuition fee increases (being set directly by the state, not by individual universities; just as all forms of money students now get is directly controlled by the state – grants, loans, etc.) Within that struggle, there are at least four way we could potentially use the perspective to advance the struggle. First, it will be important to articulate our view of what schoolwork is, as opposed to the student union/traditional left defense of the "right to education" or "quality of education", because it fails to express what the student struggle is about – students do have liberal tendencies in some cases, but more and more they are struggling for themselves now, not for future students or even not for what might become of them later – they know that won't add up to much. Second, we want to analyze the present composition of students, for instance, how widespread underemployment of recent graduates is affecting current students, and also how the return to school of many Arts grads to get more job-oriented training affects the student struggle – many of these returnees have participated or been fairly directly affected by the wage offensive in recent years, and will bring some of that experience back with them. These factors will affect how different groups of students will relate to struggles as students for more money and less work.

Third, we need to analyze the relation between struggles on campus of different sections of students. For example,

the state has already hiked tuition fees for foreign students by 300% starting next fall. Various foreign student organizations have begun to organize against the increase. We have to be able to concretely advance our perspective that the state's attack on the least powerful group of students is meant to prepare the way for tuition increases for all (in the name of "justice" and non-discrimination, of course), and that the participation of Canadian students in this fight is in their own interest. Finally, we think our perspective can situate the tuition struggle (and related struggle against changes in the grant/loan program) concretely in the connection it has to the struggles of other sections of the class in Canada. Already there have been important occasions when student struggles offered the potential for mass links to other workers' struggles (as occurred during an important library workers' strike this spring at U of Toronto, which in fact got little active support from students); the perspective can present a basis for linking struggles to build the power of both sections of workers rather than the traditional left "solidarity with the real workers" approach, which invariably fails.

It's unclear at present to what extent it's within our limited capacity as a group to move on these potential ways of using the Wages for Students perspective within the student struggle this fall. That will become clear later on. However, the struggle three of us will be part of as students this fall, whatever form that takes, does provide an important concrete focus for concretizing many of the experiences and the political perspective our collective is moving forward on at present.

Let's hear what you're thinking and doing.

The Toronto Collective June/76.