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Women and equality

Margaret Cowl

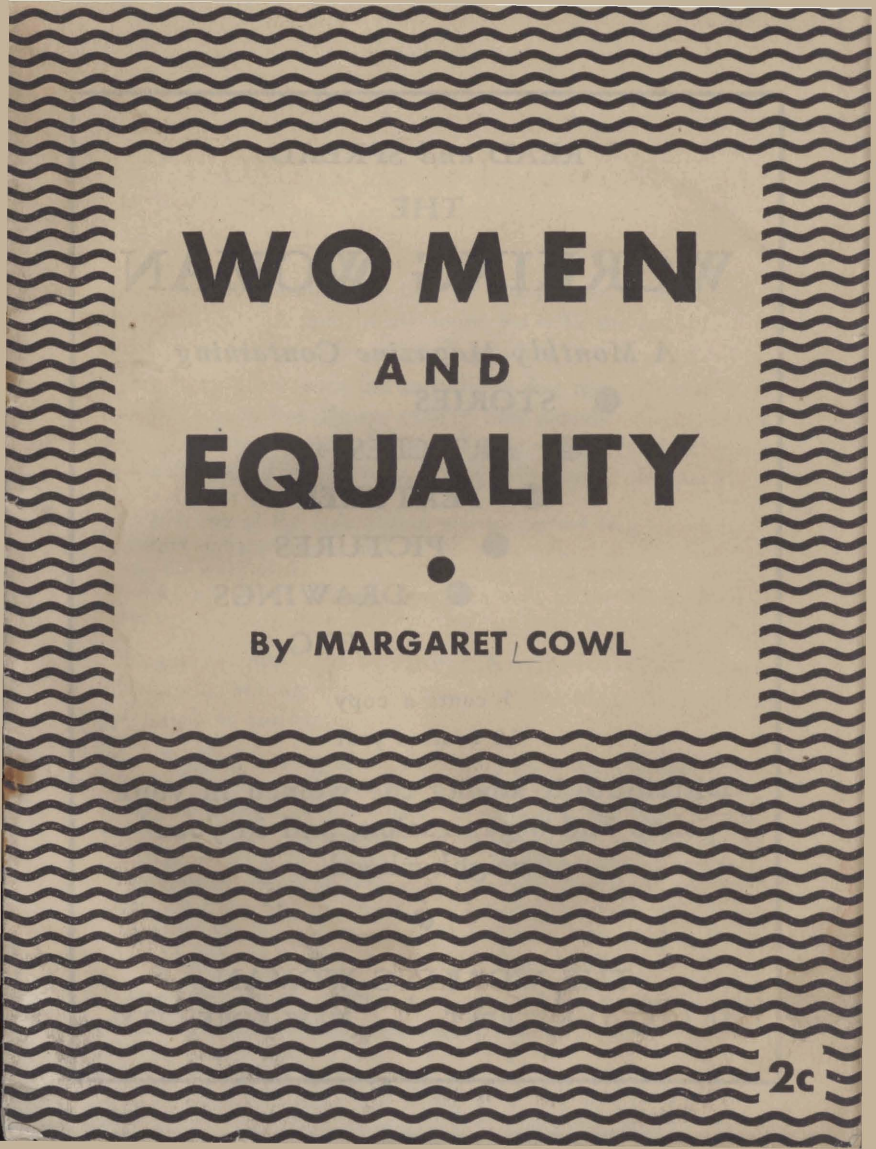
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**WOMEN
AND
EQUALITY**



By **MARGARET COWL**

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WOMEN AND EQUALITY

By MARGARET COWL

IT IS an undisputed fact that all women are in an unequal position with men in all countries with the exception of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

We have often been led to believe that this unequal position of women has always existed and therefore is a natural one. Frederick Engels, a noted philosopher and scientist, in his *Origin of the Family*, attacks this idea. He says:

"It is one of the most absurd notions derived from eighteenth century enlightenment, that in the beginning of society woman was the slave of man. Among all savages and barbarians of the lower and middle stages, sometimes even of the higher stage, women not only have freedom, but are held in high esteem."

Engels is supported by Arthur Wright, for many years a missionary among the Seneca Iroquois, who writes about the latter as follows:

"The female part generally ruled the house; the provisions were held in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too indolent or too clumsy to contribute his share to the common stock. No matter how many children or how much private property he had in the house, he was liable at any moment to receive a hint to gather up his belongings and get out. . . . The women were the dominating power in the clans (gentes) and everywhere else. Occasionally they did not hesitate to dethrone a chief and degrade him to a common warrior."

The freedom of women, as described by Arthur Wright, coincided with the non-existence of private property. Wealth

consisted chiefly of tools for obtaining and preparing food; houses, clothing and ornaments.

“Human labor power”, says Engels, “at this stage does not yet produce a considerable amount over and above its cost of subsistence.” Human beings produced chiefly for the purposes of existence, not as today, when production is chiefly for making profits.

The introduction of cattle-raising, of the metal industry, of weaving, and finally of agriculture wrought a change. Captured enemies were no longer put to death or absorbed into the clan as members. They were put to work and the proceeds of their labor, over and above that needed for their own subsistence, belonged not to themselves but to certain families whose riches increased.

According to the division of labor at that time, the task of obtaining food and the tools necessary for this purpose belonged to the man; he owned the latter and kept them in case of separation, as the woman did the household goods. According to this social custom, the man became also the owner of the new source of existence, the cattle, and later on of the new labor power, the slaves. He accumulated the riches produced by the labor of others. He became the owner of private property, the exploiter of human labor power.

But his children could not inherit his property. According to maternal law, which existed at that time, his children belonged not to his clan, but to the clan from whence the mother came. Upon his death, his closest relatives inherited his property. His children were disinherited.

“In the measure of the increasing wealth man’s position in the family became superior to that of woman, and the desire arose to use this fortified position for the purpose of overthrowing

the traditional law of inheritance in favor of his children.” (Engels, *Origin of the Family*.)

Maternal law was abolished.

“The downfall of maternal law was the historic defeat of the female sex. The men seized the reins also in the house, the women were stripped of their dignity, enslaved, tools of men’s lust and mere machines for the generation of children.” (Engels, *Origin of the Family*.)

Inequality Based on Exploitation

The present inequality of women as compared to men, the unequal position of the Negro toiling population in the U.S.A. as compared to that of the white workers, the unequal position of the laboring masses as a whole as compared to that of those who do not work but who own the wealth of the country, have a common basic reason, namely: The existence of the exploitation of one human being by another under the system of the *private* ownership of the things most essential to produce the necessities of life. (The ownership of the railroads, the factories, factory machinery, sources of raw materials, the banks, etc.)

The exploiting class, or, as it is commonly called, the capitalist class, does not work, but accumulates riches from the labor of others. They are the masters. The working class, who build the subways, the sky-scrapers, dig the coal, till the soil, grow the food, make the machinery for the factories, run the railroads, ship and distribute the things that are essential to maintain life, do the bookkeeping, the typing, the teaching, etc., etc., who produce all the riches of the land, receive only a small part of the proceeds of their labor in the form of money wages. The rest is pocketed by the employing class. They, the workers, are the hired slaves of the masters, the capitalist class.

The capitalist class is only a small minority of the population. The working class, together with the working farmers, the small business people and the professional groups, make up the great majority of the population. The latter three groups are also squeezed more and more by the capitalist class.

Thus there exists the exploitation of one human being by another under the capitalist system of society, sanctioned by the government which is controlled by the capitalist class, a system based on the *division of the population into classes*—those who work, the great majority of whom have nothing and a small number who have a little, but are daily losing it, and those who do not work but who have everything.

Not only men but women too are to be found in the capitalist class. There are women employing large numbers of workers, women who have many servants, etc. *Therefore the division in society is not women against men, but workers against exploiters, against capitalists.*

However, the women in the capitalist class have not the same rights with men of that class. This is a remnant of the historic change as described earlier. The profits these women accumulate through the exploitation of workers (of both men and women workers), according to law in the U.S.A., are not always their own property to do with as they please.

These old unjust laws appear in the form of inequality in marriage, no free choice in the selection of nationality by the mother for her children (generally the nationality of the father is the one recognized), inequality in the choice of a career, etc.

Because of their position, it is therefore natural that these women of the capitalist class who are not on a par with the

men of their class and who themselves either exploit labor or live on the proceeds of such exploitation, see a division in society along sex lines and not along class lines as described above.

It is no wonder, then, that they are the prominent leaders of the feminist movement in the U.S.A., and the most active foes of labor legislation for working-class women.

By the time large scale industry developed, with factories replacing household and small-shop production and machinery taking the place of the hand tool, many traditions stamping women's position in society as inferior to man's had already taken root.

Discrimination—Weapon Against All Workers

The employer of labor utilized these reactionary ideas about women to make more profits for himself. Especially when machinery was simplified women were employed in larger numbers at wages lower than the wages received by men for the same kind of work. (Negro women were and are paid even lower wages than white women.) New machines did not require as much muscular strength. Supple limbs fitted in with the increased speed-up in the factories. Wages of men workers were reduced and became insufficient to feed and clothe the entire family. Rather than see their loved ones starve, women entered the factories in greater numbers to earn their daily bread. (For statistics see *Women Who Work** by Grace Hutchins). The entrance of women into industry is in itself a progressive factor. But the oppressive conditions forced upon them are degrading.

It is a fact that in the U.S.A. many women in skilled

* International Publishers, 1934. \$1.

trades, where it took years of learning to achieve that skill, receive less wages than unskilled men workers.

In her book, *Women Who Work*, Grace Hutchins writes that married women or women who had been married make up 46.1 per cent of all working women in the U.S.A. "In certain centers", she writes, "especially in the South where many Negro women are employed and in towns where there are many foreign-born women in industry, the proportion of married, widowed, and divorced women wage-earners is sometimes as high as 70 per cent. In face of the growing propaganda to oust married women from industry (in the U.S.A. with a law calling for dismissal of married women in government employ as a precedent to discharge married women from industry, and with the Westinghouse Company in New York already taking the hint), illusions are created among married women in industry that if they increase their speed they will not be dismissed. Thus they become a prey for increased speed-up without increase in wages. They become difficult to organize into trade unions for fear of losing their jobs. This intensified work on the part of married women arouses a competition between men and women workers and creates a sex antagonism which acts in favor of the employer because it helps to keep the men and women workers divided so that they cannot unitedly struggle for improved conditions.

Lower Wages for Women Means Lower Wages for All

A reserve army of cheap labor power is created. The presence in the factories of such cheap labor; mothers, wives of unemployed workers clinging to the factory gates in search of work, with thoughts of the empty milk bottle at home, offers a fine basis for an offensive against the wages of all workers.

The splendid qualities of women, their tender feelings for their loved ones, were and are used by the employers in the attempt to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by men workers against increasing exploitation, against the lowering of the standard of living of the working class. That part of Lord Ashley's speech, quoted by Karl Marx in a footnote in *Capital*, Volume I, delivered in London in 1844 on the Ten-Hour Bill, wherein he said "thus are the virtues, the peculiar virtues of the female character to be perverted to her injury—thus all that is most dutiful and tender in her nature is made a means of her bondage and suffering", applies to the present position of women who work.

The precedent of lower wages for women is now being used to reduce wages for all workers, particularly in fascist Germany. Women workers are dismissed and men employed at wages even lower than the wages paid to women, on the ground that the employment of male labor would increase wage costs. Men are replacing women at "women's wages" but on condition that they increase their speed. Adult women who know how to struggle for improved conditions, are being dismissed and young girls are taking their place at lower wages and with greater speed-up. While Hitler was broadcasting the demand for the return of women to the kitchen, children and church, the number of women in German industry increased in the first nine months of 1933 by 9.1 per cent, especially in the industries manufacturing articles for war purposes.

In the U.S.A. this principle of lower wages for women workers has been sanctioned by the Roosevelt N.R.A. codes. Lower minimum wages for women were written into over 120 codes. In the South the white men workers in the textile industry receive less wages than do the men textile workers

in the North. But the women textile workers in the South receive lower wages than the Southern men workers in that industry. The Negro women workers in the textile industry in the South receive even lower wages than do their Southern white sisters. This is in accord with the provisions of the Code administration.

With another war on our heels, with competition among the capitalists increasing, employers fight more doggedly to hold on to this source of cheap labor power. Lower pay for women is a way of keeping wages low for all workers. To keep working women in this double servitude, the false ideas about women's inferiority must be maintained. The inequality of women is legalized. This weaker economic position of women is used to deprive them of equal rights and often to humiliate them.

Motherhood of working-class women remains unprotected under a capitalist society. Frequently the working mother must hide her pregnancy (ofttimes to the point of deforming herself). In the U.S.A. there is no maternity insurance as provided for in the Workers' Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill, H.R. 2827. Therefore the working mother is forced to work until the last day, knowing that child-birth most likely means loss of her job, her earnings. In the U.S.A., under the vicious anti-birth-control laws, working women are not permitted the liberty to determine the size of their families. Particularly the unemployed women, who cannot pay the bootleg-racketeer prices for birth-control information, are forced to bear many children who upon their very birth are doomed to inequality.

Millions of women are harnessed to the drudgery of the narrow life in the household. In many cases they are not released from this monotonous toil at home even when they are driven into the factories, mills, offices.

Thus we see that there is a close connection between the social and human position of women and the system of private property, whose very existence pre-supposes squeezing profits out of those who work; a condition where women are kept in a humiliating position, without full rights, without equality.

To win *complete* equality with men in practice, in the family, in the State, in society, women must become *active* together with the entire working class in the struggle to change the present social system, the capitalist system of society, based on exploitation of one human being by another, to a socialist system of society, where all exploitation and oppression is eliminated and production is carried on for the benefit of the producers. This change can be secured only under a workers' and farmers' government, a Soviet form of government.

The "aim of Socialism", wrote Lenin, "in the whole world, is to fight exploitation of one human being by another".

In reply to the accusations that there is no democracy in the Soviet Union, Lenin replied:

"We see equality declared in all the democratic republics, but in the civil laws and the laws dealing with women and her position in the family, in the question of divorce, in every step we observe inequality and degradation for women. And we declare that this is violation of democracy, particularly with regard to the oppressed. The Soviet Power more than any other of the most advanced countries, has realized democracy by the very fact that not a single trace of inequality for women was left in its laws.

"For the complete emancipation of women and for their real equality with men, it is necessary to establish social economy and the participation of women in general productive labor. Only then will the women occupy the same place as the man.

"It is understood that when we talk of equality for women in productive labor, in extent of labor, its duration, conditions, etc.,

we mean that the woman should not be oppressed in her economic position in comparison with the man. You all know that even in conditions of complete equality, there still remains the real oppression of woman, because she carries the whole burden of the household.

“ . . . such work, petty in itself, cannot help the development of women.”

Complete Equality in the Soviet Union

In the 14 years since Lenin made these true statements, the position of women in the Soviet Union has advanced by leaps and bounds. (The pamphlet *Women in the Soviet Union* by F. Nurina tells the story of women's freedom in the Soviet Union.)

Communist Parties in all countries, including the Communist Party in the U.S.A., are working to mobilize the masses of women for the program of the Communist International which includes:

Complete equality between men and women before the law and in social life; a radical reform of marital and family laws; recognition of maternity as a social function; protection of mothers and infants. Initiation of social care and upbringing of infants and children. Creches, kindergartens, children's homes, etc.).

The establishment of institutions that will gradually relieve the burden of house drudgery (public kitchens and laundries); and systematic cultural struggle against the ideology and traditions of female bondage.

This program of the Communist International is based on Lenin's teachings, especially when he said:

“We hate, yes, hate, everything, and will abolish everything which tortures and oppresses the woman worker, the housewife, the peasant woman, the wife of the petty trader, yes, and in many cases the women of the possessing classes.”

What Can We Do

The Communist Party warns the masses of women in the U.S.A. that the road to women's freedom suggested by the Socialist Party is a false one. The slanderous propaganda conducted against the Soviet Union, the fairy tales about the militarization of children in the Soviet Union, are an attempt to turn the hate of the masses of the women for imperialist war and fascism into a hate against the Soviet Union; it means an attempt to turn the masses of women away from the path of struggle for complete equality, for freedom. The Socialist Party, over a period of years, preached the "peaceful" way to achieve freedom to the workers in Germany—and see how the shackles of degradation have been tightened around the millions of women in fascist Germany.

Even suffrage rights for women in the U.S.A. were won only by the most determined struggle and only when working women had fought through a number of great strikes for better economic conditions.

The development of special forms and methods to fit in with the special position of women, which will facilitate the struggle for immediate improvement of the conditions of the masses of women, is needed in the fight for complete equality and freedom.

Women's committees in the trade unions and special women's meetings called by the trade unions are essential to give proper attention to special women's problems; the special women's meetings will develop the initiative and activity of women inside the trade union; they will become better organizers and pioneers for the organizing of the masses of working women into the trade unions. Women's trade union auxiliaries—comprising the women relatives

and friends of the men workers—are a powerful aid to the workers in their struggles for better conditions and a means of mobilizing women in the fight against the high cost of living, sales taxes, and against war and fascism.

These special forms and methods should be only as an auxiliary means to the general forms already adopted by the entire working class to improve its daily life. The demand of equal pay for equal work for women as part of workers' demands in their strike struggles is necessary, not only to improve the conditions of women workers, but to ward off attacks upon the wages of all workers. This should be a demand primarily in strike struggles, but activities should be organized, especially of women, to enforce legislation for equal pay.

Abolition of the anti-birth-control laws; establishment of free day nurseries for working mothers; establishment of free birth-control clinics; enactment of legislation for maternity insurance (the support of H.R. 2827 which is the only Bill providing maternity insurance); other such legislative enactment that would make up a Mothers' Bill of Rights, can only be obtained by women if they band together and organize various activities for the realization of same.

The Workers' Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill (H. R. 2827), the only Bill which provides for immediate payment of unemployment insurance, can become law only if workers, including women, increase mass pressure for its enactment.

The abolition of laws discriminating against women, the extension of existing rights for women, can be obtained only by following the example set by those really very courageous women who so valiantly fought for the right of suffrage

for women in the U.S.A. Various bills for laws that would improve the status of women generally "die in committee". Organized action in the form of demonstrations, strikes, visits of delegations to the various government bodies, etc., by the masses of women directly affected by these discriminatory laws, is the only way to force favorable results.

Victories become fruitless, unless women benefit by them. That is why it is necessary for white women to fight for the same equal rights for Negro women as white women, to support the activities of Negro women for liberation.

Various forms of action against war and fascism by women are essential to fight against threatening slaughter of mankind.

To make known to broad masses of women the position of the women in the Soviet Union, their complete equality with men, the almost complete eradication of the old ideas about the inferiority of women, that this is all taking place under the Soviet form of government, is also part of the fight for freedom on the part of the women in the U.S.A.

All the activities as mentioned above, by masses of women, are links in the chain of struggle that will eventually break the shackles that bind woman and lead her forth into that world of freedom and happiness that only a Socialist society can give.

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